

Note, this is an H/G story; I'll also say that their "relationship time" is pretty minimal in this story; they mostly act as best friends.

((A/N: Some of you may have been wonder where I've been, since I released most of my stories one after the other for over a year. Well, I took a few months off to rest my brain from all the writing. I've also started working on an "epic sized" story, and the notes and other background work has taken a lot of time.

Also on my profile page is a status of what I'm doing, and I do update it from time to time. So if you want to know if what's in my writing queue, that's the place to go look.

I don't know that I'm good enough to write a satirical story, but if you can't easily give a solid definition to the word "lampoon", you should go look it up in the dictionary or google its definition. It will be a useful 30 seconds of your time. Also, to the "canon police", yes I have changed the time when Hagrid goes to see Harry about school, but history has already changed before then as well, and this timing works better for this story. :-)

This story will follow Harry's 7 years at Hogwarts, which will be in 9 parts over 3 "largish" chapters. When I first thought of this story, I envisioned a one-shot of 25K-30K words; it appears I'll hit nearly 78Kw. Sigh...I guess that's what it needed to be.

I definitely want to thank moshpit and Sovran for being pre-beta's, for being a sounding board and for giving me ideas to make this story better. Also, wolfscream did his usual excellent job in being my final beta. Thanks guys!

Enjoy! -- kb.))
(((Before Hogwarts)))

((A/N: The bold parts in this first little section are from "The Philosopher's Stone" by J..))

Professor McGonagall watched Albus Dumbledore walk up to the Muggle house she had been watching all day in her cat form. They talked of the downfall of the Dark Lord for a few minutes before she

asked, "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean -- you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. "Dumbledore -- you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. They are the worst sort of Muggles I've ever seen. And they've got this son -- I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come live here? You can't be serious?"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly. "His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He'll be famous -- a legend -- I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter Day in future -- there will be books written about Harry -- every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed and then said, "Yes -- yes, you're right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?" She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

"Hagrid's bringing him."

"You think it -- wise -- to trust Hagrid with something as important as this?"

"I would trust Hagrid with my life," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place," said Professor McGonagall grudgingly, "but you can't pretend he's not careless. He does tend to -- what was that?"

A flying motorbike appeared with Hagrid riding it and with a baby in his arms. Faster than Minerva would have expected, little Harry Potter was deposited on the doorstep with a letter and the three magical adults were leaving.

"I sincerely hope you're right about this, Albus," she murmured to herself as she Apparated away. Hagrid took the motorbike and flew off to his destination.

As Albus Dumbledore restored the lights to the street lights before he left, unbeknownst to him, a hand waved twice. The blood wards on the house behind him changed slightly but significantly. As the old wizard was about to leave, a new thought came to him and he came to a new decision. Pulling his wand out, he waved it at the boy, satisfied this was even better. As he left the Muggle neighborhood, one small item on Dumbledore's mental to-do list left his mind, not to be remembered for a long time.

Little Harry Potter was in his usual position for this time of day: curled up in the smallest ball he could make, on a blanket, on the floor, in the cupboard, under the stairs, in his aunt and uncle's house. His head of shaggy almost black hair lay at the door, which was latched on the outside, and he listened with his very acute hearing for any sounds that might come through the crack around the door. That position was also the coolest place to be, as he might catch a wisp of cool air that occasionally came under the door. Because it was the middle of summer and quite warm outside, he enjoyed the cool wisps on his face. One of his life's few pleasures, although he would not have expressed it that way.

A creak came from above him and he knew someone was up and he would have to be up soon. There was no set schedule, but there were

very ingrained habits in this house. They would let him out of his "room" for one minute to go to the bathroom before he had to start making breakfast for everyone. If he got lucky, he would not hurt himself while he did so and he would get a little something to eat. If every day of his life had not been like this for as long as he could remember, he would have sighed or been angry; but this was normal for his life and he did not know any better, so he did not fight it -- at least not anymore.

Long ago, so long he could not place it in time, he had wished very hard he was somewhere else, or that he never had to endure this any more. He thought that the word death applied, but he was not totally sure. Harry had never left number four Privet Drive and his aunt had never taught him anything except for cooking and cleaning. He knew how to do many little things around the house, in addition to the few things he picked up by listening to his aunt and uncle, or by secretly listening to the telly. He knew just enough to realize that there were a great many things about the world and life that he did not know. He spared no thought about those unknown things. Knowing them would serve no purpose, nor would they keep him safe. The fact of the matter was, Harry did not care -- all curiosity had been forcefully removed from him years ago.

Footsteps came from overhead and to the side a bit, before they started coming down the stairs directly over him. It did not take more than a couple of steps before Harry knew it was his aunt coming down. She was normally the one to come down and let him out to start his work. Harry had never been able to decide who he preferred to let him out; each of his three relatives had their own drawbacks.

His aunt was the most strict and watched him the most carefully. He never liked her gaze on him. Fortunately, she usually only hit him with a long wooden spoon or a yardstick, or sent him back to his cupboard without dinner for his punishment. He supposed that if he had to pick one of them, he would say that his aunt was the easiest on him, but he would never admit that.

Then there was his darling cousin, as the fat boy was routinely called. He was not too bad, as he was so stupid and slow that Harry could usually hide from him or scurry away to avoid him, at least as long as

his aunt or uncle were not around. But if they were, or Harry got unlucky and his cousin caught him anyway, well, there were worse things than a few bruises.

Finally, his uncle rounded out the last of his relatives, and rounded was the right term for the extremely large and stubborn man. His uncle did not pay that much attention to Harry, unless he needed something done, or some chore was not done to his varying standards. When that happened, then things got really bad. Running away from his uncle to hide only made it worse; Harry did not think about that if he could help it.

The footsteps finally made it to his door. Harry heard the latch being slid open before bright sunlight flooded into his little area and blinded him more than he was. Not that it mattered if he could see, as he normally could not see well anyway. He could tell it was her by her perfumey smell.

“Boy! Get up and go start breakfast. I better see you in the kitchen in one minute.” She walked off and Harry crawled out of his little place and hurried for the bathroom to relieve himself. He felt fortunate that he could do so, he was not always let out in time. It gave his room its own unique smell.

After the bathroom, he quickly made his way to the kitchen and started pulling out things to make breakfast. This was not too hard as long as no one actively got in his way. He felt for the proper pans and put them on the stove. Next he headed for the refrigerator and felt for the food he needed to make the full breakfast his relatives liked. Here, his sense of smell served him well, though he had memorized a few pictures on the food packages, which he could see if he held them close enough to his face to see sort of clearly -- if he squinted just right.

As he finished breakfast, he took it in serving bowls to the table, barely missing the foot his cousin Dudley had stuck out. It was a common trick of the fat boy.

Harry scampered back to the safety of the kitchen, away from his relatives in the dining room. He made the noises of cleaning up while

he hastily ate extra out of the pans he had cooked in. His aunt rarely came in the kitchen for breakfast anymore, so he could almost get one decent meal a day -- usually. She supervised his cooking of lunch and dinner much more closely.

He had barely finished washing the big pans by hand when he heard the mail slot open and then bang shut. Harry stepped down off the low stool that allowed him to reach the sink and went to the front door, drying his hands on the rags that covered him. It was not too hard to find the white fuzzy blobs of envelopes on the dark brown wood floor in the entryway. Picking them up, he took them to his aunt, since she was usually the safest one to approach. He never bothered to look at the mail to see who it was addressed to; after all, he could not read so it did not matter. Therefore, he never saw that one of the envelopes was addressed to "Harry Potter".

Again, it would not have matter because Harry did not know his last name, and if someone had asked him, he would have told them he was not really sure what his first name was. He assumed it was "Freak", since "boy" was a word that could apply to anyone his age, but he really did not know. He only knew that he had to answer to both words.

Ducking under a swinging fist from his cousin, which made just enough whooshing noise to be heard, Harry scurried back to the kitchen to finish his breakfast chores. He had barely made it back to the sink when he heard his aunt's voice come through the doorway.

"Vernon, it's happened."

"What dear?"

"A letter ... from them." She sounded disgusted.

Harry did his best to listen from the other room. He did his best to always listen to what went on around him and how people spoke. Their voices told him how they were feeling, and clued him into how fast he would need to duck or cover up.

"Petunia, you're going to have to be more specific..." a slightly exasperated uncle said. A clink of a coffee cup on a saucer followed.

"You know," his aunt returned in an exasperated voice, "them! The school in the note from years ago, they say it's time for him to start."

The pause from the other room grew so long Harry was not sure if his uncle was having to think very hard, or if they had moved to the living room so he wouldn't hear. He was not sure why, but he thought he were not talking about Dudley. They had already been talking about his cousin starting a new school when he went back, so there was no need for yet another new one, or was there? His uncle's voice finally broke the long silence.

"Don't know why we'd want to ruin a good thing by sending him away. After all, he's never been to school before, why start now?"

Harry puzzled through that. Dudley had started going to school five years ago, or so he thought. Time had never been easy to figure out when he had nothing to reference. The novel thought that they might be talking about him finally occurred to him, but he doubted they really meant it. He did all the work for his aunt around the house, so school was not for him.

"True," his aunt's voice answered. "I'll just toss it in the bin. If we don't reply I would expect them to continue to leave us alone."

There was nothing more interesting said from the other room as Harry finished washing the cookware. Harry could not have cared less about his uncle's work. He would have loved to have heard that his aunt was taking his cousin out for the day. They would leave him lots of work to do in that case, but at least he would be by himself that way. Unfortunately, it sounded like both of them would be there today, and today was the day to change all the sheets on the beds upstairs. That almost guaranteed a problem when he did his cousin's bed.

Harry rinsed out the sink and put his stool away. He continued to be silent as he waited for his relatives to finish eating so he could retrieve those dishes to clean too, and maybe eat a few leftovers off their plates if he got lucky. That did not happen very often, but he was

always watchful for when it did and no one was looking. His day continued on as normal, and by the end when he was locked up in his cupboard again, he felt lucky he only had two new bruises, thanks to his cousin, and small ones at that.

The next day started out like the last one, but the morning mail was very different today. In addition to a stiff ivory letter in the mail slot, another envelope just like it flew into the house and landed on the hearth of the fireplace. If Harry had not been in the entryway getting the normal mail, he would not have heard the special delivery envelope hit the stone in front of the small fireplace. But since he did, he went over and noticed the envelope there and picked it up. He took all the mail to his aunt and scampered away back to the kitchen.

As he was wiping the counters down, he heard his aunt exclaim. "Vernon! There's two of them now!" That got Harry's attention. She never raised her voice unless it was at him. He continued to move the rag around on the counter even though he was watching the doorway, watching for the shape of his aunt to come through it. If he was going to get punished, it was much better to be standing on the floor than on his little stool. Falling from there hurt a lot.

"You mean two letters?"

"Yes!" His aunt was still shouting. "I think they want a reply!"

Like yesterday, there was a long pause. "Just ignore them," his uncle finally said. "They'll stop soon."

Harry could hear his aunt huffing a bit, but she did not say anything else. Harry felt lucky he was not blamed for the two letters.

It was the end of the week, Friday, or so Harry reckoned it to be. Harry wondered if they would get any special letters today, whatever they were for. The letter had come for the last two days and for the first time in a very long time, Harry felt a spark of curiosity. They were kept so secret, he did begin to wonder if they were letters about him. Maybe someone wanted him to go live with them. Harry quickly squashed that thought. It would not do to get his hopes up. When he did, he always made a mistake in something and Uncle Vernon was never happy about that. His right hand was a vivid reminder never to make Uncle Vernon unhappy.

Still, there was a hope that would not quite die, that someday, Harry would be able to go live somewhere else. He looked out the window and saw the neighbor's house, or the fuzzy blob that he knew must be their house. Even visiting there would be nice, he thought, but that never happened. Harry had never been out of the house he lived in. Whenever he had tried to go, or his relatives had tried to take him out, it was like an invisible hand was holding him in. He just could not pass through the front or back doors. He could, and did for hours, sit in front of open doors and windows staring out at all the colors, dreaming about anywhere else, but he could never go through the openings.

In the perfect dream world, Harry thought he would go find a place where he had a comfortable bed like his cousin's, and he did not have to cook or clean. Yes, no work would be wonderful. But most importantly of all, he would have someone who cared for him. Someone who would never hurt him, and who would hold him and make him feel safe. Maybe someone with ... long red hair. Harry was not sure why that seemed comforting, but it did.

When the morning mail came this morning, Harry heard a strange noise coming from the front door, so he went to see what it was, while his relatives continued to eat breakfast. In the entryway under the little slot in the front door was a white pile halfway to his little knees. He could never carry it all. In his fear at failing, he uncharacteristically whimpered, something he had not done in a long time. That was bad because he heard the phrase that that struck fear into his heart.

"What have you done now, Freak?"

Harry turned around and saw his uncle's head peering through the open doorway of the dining room and looking in his direction. His uncle never liked to be disturbed while eating; the consequences were most severe. Doing his best to do what was expected of him, and hoping the punishment would not be too bad, Harry scooped up as many letters as he could in his small arms, using his damaged right hand to hold them to his little body, and walked towards his uncle. Because of his right hand, he left or dropped as many letters as he was carrying. As he reached his uncle, the letters were pulled

from him and he was shoved back towards the front door hard enough that he fell on his bum.

“Well, get the rest you freak!” his uncle bellowed.

The little boy was relieved he had gotten off so light. As fast as he could, he picked up another armload of letters. Returning, he noticed his uncle was reading one of the letters, and he was turning red and continuing towards purple. Harry's eyes started darting around, looking for a place to hide if it got too bad. There were none, the Dursleys had eliminated them a long time ago; but Harry still looked for the best one left.

“That's it! I will not have one of them come to this house!” Harry cringed at the shout. “Petunia, be packed by the time I get home tonight.”

“What is it, Vernon?”

“Those FREAKS say one of them will be here tomorrow morning to talk with us. I refuse to do that. I know a place we can go and they won't find us, so be ready to go when I get home.”

“Yes dear,” his aunt replied, but she was looking at him and Harry was afraid. He knew that look meant she blamed him.

Because he was looking towards her, he never saw the beefy hand coming toward him, but he felt it. Harry felt his head hit on the edge of the doorway as he was flung backwards. “Stupid, freaks; can't keep their noses out of other people's business.” Harry barely heard the muttering of his uncle, but he did feel his hand being stepped on as his uncle left for work. It was only with the greatest of difficulty that he did not cry out from the pain. His only consolation was that it had been his right hand, which only half worked anyway.

He was still trying to clear his head and get his bearing after being knocked about when he felt a pointed shoe nudge him in the ribs. “Well, get up and get to work, boy!” his aunt commanded him. “And start by tossing all of those letters in the bin.” Harry saw her pick up the one his uncle had been reading and walk away, talking to herself.

As he slowly crawled back towards the front door to pick up more letters, he only thought was how glad he was that his cousin was still eating, and therefore, had left him alone -- at least for now.

When his aunt went upstairs and his cousin was still busy eating his fourth helping of breakfast, Harry took one of the letters and quickly hid it in his little cupboard. He knew he had no hope of reading it, and in fact, he was not even certain the letter was about him, but for some reason he could not name, he felt he should keep one, so he did. He also prayed that letter was never found; he did not want to think about what would happen if it was found.

Harry was finishing the vacuuming of the living room when his uncle came in. Because he was busy working, his uncle left him alone. That was a lesson Harry had learned long ago: look busy when his uncle was around. Even though Harry had quickly looked down, so it appeared he was looking at the rug he was working on, he had seen the long and thin box in his uncle's arms as he walked in the door. Harry wondered what was in the box, but only for a split second. He really only cared because he wondered if it was something he should be afraid of.

"Boy!" Harry heard his aunt calling him, so he turned off the vacuum and quickly went to find her in the kitchen. "Boy, take our food to the dining room. I've put your plate here for you eat when you're done." Harry saw it was maybe half of what he had eaten for breakfast, and it was mainly the part that had stuck to the pans. He did his best to not make any sound of disapproval as he took the bowls of savory food into the dining room for his relatives. Even his aunt would not put up with sounds from him.

When he had finished serving the food, Harry put the vacuum up and then ate his meager portion in the kitchen. Though he had no real feeling about it, in some ways he was satisfied. Many nights he got nothing at all, so even this little amount eaten while he was sitting on his little stool was considered good.

The moment Harry finished eating, he started washing the dishes. Then he had the dishes from the other room. His aunt was telling him to hurry, they had to go. Harry was wondering if he was going too. He

really hoped so, but deep down he did not expect to as he had never been able to get out of the house before.

He had barely finished in the kitchen when his aunt thrust a grocery bag into his hands. "Take this and put your extra change of clothes in it. We'll see if you can come this time, because I really don't want to leave you here alone." Harry almost smiled as he felt wanted for the first time, but as his hopes started to rise, he heard the sneer in his aunt's voice. "There's no telling what you'd break if we left you here and you'd stink up the house if we left you locked in your cupboard all weekend, though you do deserve that."

Glad his fleeting hope had never been visible, Harry walked to his cupboard to get his one extra change of clothes. As he put his clothes in the bag, Harry discovered the bag had an extra piece of cardboard in the bottom. He did not know why it was there, but he did notice that it would come out. For reasons he knew not, Harry reached up above the little doorway to a hollow place in the wall only he knew about and pulled the letter down and hid it in the bottom of the bag under the cardboard. A part of Harry did not know if he would ever come back here, so he wanted to take it with him. He also shoved his thin light blue blanket into the bag too. Harry had had it for as long as he could remember. He had no idea why, but he drew comfort from it.

"Freak! Get out here and help us carry everything!" his uncle yelled.

Taking his paper bag with him, Harry came to the bottom of the stairs. "Grab those two suitcases and take them to the car and put them in the boot, Boy." Harry did as he was told, carrying the bags to the attached garage. It was a struggle to lift them into the back of the car because he was so short and the bags were so heavy, but he somehow managed, just like he did most other things, as the motivation to avoid punishment spurred him on.

Just as he got the two suitcases into the boot of the car, his uncle came out with one more suitcase and the long thin box. He shoved them into the boot of the car too. "Well, what are you standing there for, you freak, get in the car!"

Harry scrambled to where his uncle was pointing, into the boot of the car, his little bag in his hand; it was a tight fit with the three big suitcases. His uncle slammed the lid, not seeming to care if Harry had his head down or not.

He thought about all the other times the Dursleys had tried to drive away with him in the car. It had never worked before, something always happened. The keys would get lost, the car would not start, the garage door would not open. It was the strangest thing. And always, as soon as Harry would get out of the car, whatever had gone wrong, would suddenly work correctly. Walking out the garage door into the driveway was just as impossible as walking out the front door. So Harry wondered what would happen. Of course, he was not the only one. He could hear his aunt asking his same question to his uncle through the back seat.

To everyone's surprise, Vernon opened the garage door and backed the car out, closed and locked the garage door, returned to the car, and the four occupants of number four Privet Drive drove away for the first time ever. Harry was very surprised he was outside the house and did his best to enjoy the car ride. It was a bit stuffy and uncomfortable from the lack of padding, but he had dealt with worse. He did not care that it took nearly three hours to reach their destination, nor that Dudley started complaining about being bored after the first five minutes, Harry wondered what was in store for him at the end, but his imagination could come up with nothing.

When he was finally let out of the car, it was dark and the air smelled very different. He was told to haul the suitcases to something called a boat. Not knowing what it was, he followed his aunt, practically dragging the suitcases. It was very strange see so much water, but he decided he liked it and the boat. That was because of the air blowing over his face and through his hair as they travelled in said boat for ten minutes to a small island with a small cabin. Harry was amazed, though he took great pains to hide his amazement -- the first real bout of curiosity in Harry's life that he could remember. None of the chores or having to sleep on the couch by himself with only his thin blanket could stop his internal smile as his curiosity came out for the first time. Harry listened to the storm raging outside and almost

enjoyed himself as he fell asleep for the first time outside of his cupboard.

Rubeus Hagrid went to the Headmaster's office before breakfast, as he had been requested the night before. "Mornin' Headmaster Dumbledore, sir. You askt me to com' up 'bout now?"

"Yes, thank you Rubeus," the old wizard smiled at the large man with a twinkle in his eye as he gestured to a specially conjured extra large chair, "please have a seat. Tea?"

"Thank you, Headmaster, mighty kin' of ya, sir."

"No problem at all, Rubeus." He poured tea into a small tankard and handed it over, while Albus poured into a teacup for himself. "Well, now that we have this, I have a question for you. Do you remember the little Potter boy you rescued?" Albus had not thought of him at all in many years, but seeing the Potter name on the list of new student's roster had reminded him.

"Certainly, Headmaster. Fine parents they were too, James an' Lily."

"Yes they were, very fine. Well, since he won't answer the letter we've sent him, I believe it's time for someone to go tell Harry that he's a wizard, as well as to take him to Diagon Alley for his school supplies. Since I know you enjoyed taking him to his Aunt and Uncle's house, I thought you might like to pick him up too. You would also get to slowly reintroduce him to the Wizarding World."

A large toothy grin broke out in the middle of the bushy black beard on the gamekeeper's face. "Aye, I'd be 'onored to, Headmaster, sir."

"Excellent, Rubeus. Here are four Portkeys for you. This red one will take you to where Harry is. According to the magical register, he seems to have moved last night. I would suppose his aunt has taken him shopping for school clothes, but this will take you to within easy walking distance of him. This second one will take you to Diagon Alley. This Portkey will allow you to take Harry home. And this Portkey will bring you back to Hogwarts." The Headmaster handed four different colored handkerchiefs over. "Just make sure Harry is holding on and say 'Activate' when you need to use one."

"Aye, sir."

"Go out to the gates and take the first one to Harry. I have to run an errand to Diagon Alley to pick up something very important while you're gone," Dumbledore dismissed the man.

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir. I'll show you tha' you can trust me too."

Dumbledore smiled. "I know I can, Rubeus, that's why I'm sending you." It was also because he would be imposing in case anything went wrong, but Hagrid did not need to know that. "Oh, and here's Harry's Gringotts key. You'll need that when you take him to Diagon Alley. Since school doesn't start for nearly a week, take your time. In fact, take a couple of days off when you're finished with Harry. Just be back by the 31st. Good luck, Rubeus."

"Thank you, sir. I won't let you down, sir." The large man left.

Albus Dumbledore chuckled to himself as he picked up another Gringotts key and used the Floo in his office to travel to Gringotts. He had a very valuable item to pick. He had almost asked Hagrid to pick it up for him, but the item was really too valuable for anyone but him to take care of.

Standing just outside of the Hogwarts gate, Hagrid grabbed the red handkerchief and held it in both hands as he said, "Activate". He felt the pull and a couple of seconds later, he was standing on a rocky surface ten yards from a rock-walled cabin. Looking around, it appeared he was on a small island. It looked like a strange place to go shopping, but who knew how Muggles really lived.

Shrugging, the half-giant stuffed the handkerchief into a pocket on his coat and strode up to the door. With the friendliest smile that he could have on his large and hairy face, the giant of a man knocked on the front door. His three knocks seemed to knock a lot of dust into the air. Waving the dust away from his face, he waited for a short time, but no one opened the door. Not sure what to do, Hagrid knocked again, but this time a little louder.

Harry awoke to a terrible pounding on the front door to the cabin they were in. A place that had given him the best night's sleep ever. Sitting

up, he looked at the door and wondered who it was. Hearing a noise from the stair area on his right, Harry turned to look and saw his Uncle Vernon in his pyjamas standing halfway down the stairs with a long metal tube in his hands.

A much louder knocking captured everyone's attention just as they had all come to grips with being rudely woken up. Uncle Vernon gave a small growl, while a squeak came from his aunt. Dudley was apparently hiding as he was not seen yet, although there was a second small squeak from upstairs.

As the knocks ended, Harry heard creaking and looked back at the door just in time to see it slowly fall inward and bang on the floor causing much dust to fly into the air. Framed in the doorway with the morning sun behind him was the largest man Harry had ever seen; he was even larger than his uncle, and that was saying something.

“Er, 'ello? Is 'Arry 'ere?”

The speech from “the thing” in the doorway unfroze everyone in the cabin. Harry had no idea why anyone would be looking for something called an “Arry”, whatever that was. He looked over to his uncle to see what he would say and was not surprised to hear, “Whoever you are, go away! We don't want your kind here!”

“Ey now, I'm sorry 'bout the door, but there's no need to be rude,” the large man said as he ducked to walk through the doorway.

“I said we don't want your kind here; so leave, or you'll be sorry!” As his uncle shouted, Harry saw him raise the metal tube, a tube that had wood on the end that went on his uncle's shoulder. Harry was not scared as it was not pointed at him. He had no idea what the thing did, but as long as he was forgotten and not involved, Harry was just fine with it all.

The giant man took a couple more steps in and stepped over the door. As he did, he was now only a couple of arm's length from his uncle, and that was when Harry heard the loudest sound he had ever heard in his short life, which caused him to jump and his aunt to scream. The giant looked down at his chest, which was now starting to show

lots of red, and wheezed, "Why di' ya do tha' for?" Then he slowly started to lean back before he loudly fell to the floor on top of the door.

Harry was shocked to see that. When he recovered, he noticed he had a ringing in his ears and hoped that would go away soon. He watched his uncle slowly walk over to the man on the floor and kick his boot. When nothing happened, a smile came to Vernon's face. "I guess I showed that freak." He laughed. That scared Harry, but he did not have time to dwell on it.

"Freak! Get over here and help me. Dudley? You come over here too." Harry obeyed as his uncle set the metal tube against the wall. "All right, search his coat to see what in it." The two boys and the fat man started looking.

Uncle Vernon pulled out a small pink parasol, and then he tossed it behind him. Harry pulled out another letter. His uncle snatched it away from him. Dudley found a little white box with a cake inside. At this find, Dudley stopped searching and proceeded to eat the cake.

When his uncle jerked his hand out of the coat like he'd been bitten, Harry found a small shiny object in another pocket. For some reason he could not name, Harry hid the pretty little thing in his hand and carefully slid it into his pants pocket while his uncle was checking out his hand. Eventually, they found that strange pocket contained a very small bird. His uncle was incensed and smashed the pocket with the bird still in it.

"Boy! Dudley! Help me drag this thing out of here." Vernon and Dudley each grabbed an arm while Harry struggled with his feet. The three of them dragged the body with the blood on a still chest down to the water. Since no one was in sight, Vernon Dursley had them pull it into the water. He then herded the boys back to the cabin. Harry heard him mutter something about "sharks taking care of it", whatever those were.

Harry watched his uncle stand the door to the cabin back up into its place and then had Harry start breakfast. That was much harder here since he had so much trouble seeing things and had no idea where everything was (how he coped at home). Therefore, he burned

himself a few times and got hit several times for taking so long. Still, Harry decided it was OK in the long run. He was out of the house.

It all seemed even better when they stayed another night. Uncle Vernon was happy when no one showed up the next morning. Deciding the freaks had had enough, Vernon drove them home. The rest of the week was just as peaceful according to Vernon Dursley: no other freaks and no stupid letters. Harry did not agree, but then he was never consulted about anything.

As Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, sat down at his desk on the morning of the 31st, he realized that Hagrid had yet to return even though school was to start the next day. There really was no reason why Hagrid should not have been back by now. Still, he was only the gamekeeper, so there was no real harm if the man showed up one day late. With a smile on his face, Albus considered that perhaps the large man had found someone special and had merely forgotten the date because he was having a good time. Therefore, the old wizard decided that he would not worry unless his old friend was not back by the welcoming feast. If that happened, he would start searching the next day. To be prepared should Hagrid be late, he started thinking about who he should ask to help the first-years into the boats and across the lake.

On the morning of the 1st of September, Petunia was having a normal breakfast until the little freak tripped and spilt the plate of sausages on her new skirt. "Ah! Boy! Look what you've done!" she shrieked.

Harry looked up from his position on the floor and wondered what they would do to him now. That it was his cousin's fault that he had tripped would make no difference, so he did not even bother to point the problem out, even if his cousin was snickering at him.

"I swear Vernon, maybe we should get rid of him after all. I don't know if I'll ever get all the grease stains out of my new skirt. And look at the rug."

Then Harry saw his uncle do something he had never done before. In situations like this, every other time he had yelled and then hit Harry, usually multiple times; but this time, he just looked at Harry with a calculating stare. Eventually, he came out of his trance and an evil

smile came upon him. Now Harry became really scared. He slowly rose up so he was on his knees, hoping he could run away to the back of his cupboard if it became too bad. That would cause them to lock him in for several days, but that might be preferable.

"You have a point, Petunia dear," the fat man said thoughtfully, at least thoughtfully for him. "As he gets older, he's eating more and it is getting harder to watch over him. And leaving him in the house alone is also getting to be more of a problem. Perhaps we should get rid of him."

Harry became even more afraid. They had threatened to kill him before, but his uncle was so calm, so calculating about it, it seemed more real to him. There was an edge to his voice that had never been there before.

"But Vernon, you know we've never be able to get him out of the house whenever we've tried to do that before," she complained, now ignoring the spots on her skirt and looking at her husband.

"True, very true; but do recall that we managed to leave the house with him for the first time last weekend. I'm wondering if those freaks did something now that his letter has come."

Harry tried to figure out what that meant and came up blank. However, it apparently meant something to his aunt as a smile slowly came to her face.

"Oh, Vernon, what a wonderful idea! We just have to take him down to the station and drop him off and then we're done with him forever. It can be just the three of us again, just as it always should have been."

"You never should have opened that damn letter, Petunia, then we wouldn't have had to take him in."

Try as he might, Harry could not figure out what it was about the letters that had arrived last week that was causing such a problem.

"I know, but what's done is done, except now we can finally fix it." His aunt returned her gaze to him and it was as cold as he had ever seen it. "Clean up the kitchen boy, every spot. You have one hour before your uncle takes you away and dumps you like the trash you are. Move!"

Harry quickly grabbed the plate he had dropped, picked up the sausages off the floor, and scurried into the kitchen. He knew he was in deep trouble, but the fact that it sounded like he was going to leave this house filled him with hope. It gave him the energy and motivation to work quickly for something other than punishment. He also got to eat more sausage that morning than ever before; he ate them as he cleaned the pans and dishes. He even had an extra in his pocket for later.

When his hour was up, Harry was done. He probably would have been done anyway, but this time he had a few extra minutes.

"Boy! Get your little bag with your extra clothes; you're going to need them," he heard his aunt command. He went into his cupboard and packed again -- everything he had. He had his clothes, his blanket, his letter was again hidden in the bottom of the bag, and a few other things, like the little shiny golden thing that he had found on the giant man and his one toy. Everything he could call his was with him. Those things in hand, he went back to find his aunt.

"Go, you little ingrate!" his aunt sneered at him. "I don't care what those freaks tell you, you are never to come back here again. This is no longer your home, not that it ever really was."

Though not using those words, he agreed with her. This was not a place he ever wanted to return to. He just hoped he could really leave.

"Well, what are you waiting on, Boy!" His uncle cuffed him, knocking him in the direction of the attached garage. Though Harry was now a little dizzy, he was pleased to find that he could get into the car, and that his uncle was able to find his keys. Instead of the boot, this time his uncle pointed to the front seat. "Get in and lay down on the floor." Harry complied. "Can't have anyone seeing you," his uncle muttered. A moment later, they were driving off to London.

What seemed like a long time later, his uncle stopped the car and turned to him with a big smile on his face. "Well Boy, this is it for you and good riddance. If it helps you any, that freaky letter said you should go to Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ to get to Hogwarts." The fat man started laughing, but Harry did not know why. When he finally calmed down, he looked at Harry one last time. "Well, go on with ya. Get out and like she said, don't ever come back."

With some difficulty, Harry got up and sat on the seat before struggling to open the door. He had barely gotten out and closed the door when his uncle sped off. Not knowing what else to do, Harry turned around and looked at the big house that was now in front of him, bigger than any house he had seen from the windows at his aunt's house. While everything was fuzzy, there were a lot people going into the big house. It was very scary, but he knew his old life had left with his uncle and this was the way things were now; he was alone and he was going to have to live with it.

Harry was not able to see the faces of all the people staring at him, so he had no idea the scene he was making by just standing there at the curb of the sidewalk in his dirty and unkempt clothes, and barefoot. Again not knowing what to do, he held his little bag to his chest with both arms and did his best to follow the other people into the building. It was not hard to follow the blobs that he saw walking, but he did not like the crowds and it was hard staying out of their way. Fortunately for him, not many people wanted to be near the little urchin in rags, especially one that had such a dirty face with long unkempt hair.

Doing his best to get out of the way of all the people hurrying around, Harry scampered over next to the wall and did his best to hurry from alcove to alcove, or to a trash bin, or anything else he could find to hide behind. That made coping with the crowd a little easier. Now that he was in the building his uncle had sent him to, he began to wonder how he would find this Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, or that Hogwhats place. Perhaps he could just live in this big building, he began to think; he did not know what else to do.

As he sat down on the floor next to a trash bin along the wall trying to decide what to do next, he heard a voice say, "Why can't I go to Hogwarts this year too?" His ears perked up. He could not see the person, but following the voice would not be hard; it was very distinctive. Screwing up his courage to brave the crowds again, he got up and did his loping run in the direction the voice had gone.

"Like I told you before, you can go next year."

"But what if I don't get my Hogwarts letter?" Harry turned slightly towards that voice and continued on. He did not want to lose it. He did not know why, but he felt he just had to go to this Hogwarts place.

"Don't you worry, dear, you will." The woman's voice sounded very sure of herself. It was the girl's aunt, he assumed.

A few minutes later, he heard the older aunt-like voice that had answered the younger voice say, "Now, all of you, go through the portal one at a time." Other voices argued with the older aunt voice, but surprisingly, she did not get mad at them. In fact, they were laughing. He was not sure what to think. If he had talked to his aunt like that, well, he did not want to think about what she would have done to him.

Even more amazingly, each of the red topped people he had been following walked towards a wall and then disappeared. That was not like any of the walls at his old home. Harry knew he could not see well, so he rubbed his eyes and watched some more. The next one disappeared too, and then each of the others. The aunt went last, and then he was all alone in the crowd again.

Just like when he walked into the train station a short time ago, Harry decided to be bold and he walked to the wall. Taking a deep breath, he walked forward and was very surprised to not hit the wall, but instead, he found himself in another room with lots of people. As before, he quickly moved to the side and did his best to hide next to the wall in a shadow. From across the way, came a loud noise; it almost hurt his ears. It looked like it came from a big reddish thing, but it was too fuzzy to make out what it was; just like most things were fuzzy to him.

"Hurry boys, get on the train before it leaves you behind," Harry heard the aunt say.

He had another decision to make. Did he stay here, or try to get on the train too, whatever a train was. It was kind of far away, but he thought he saw some of the red topped people walk to the big red thing that had made the noise. Deciding he had nothing to lose, he quickly made his way along the wall to the end of the big red thing. He found some black stairs there. With more boldness, he continued to clutch his bag to himself and he climbed up the four stairs to the little flat area at the top. It looked like there was a small door here, but Harry decided he should just stay where he was.

Another loud noise was sounded and then Harry felt the little platform he was sitting on jerk and then start to move. He watched with wide eyes as the place he had come from moved away, and he was scared that he had made the wrong decision; but it was too late to change now. He was stuck.

A few seconds later and from a growing distance, he barely heard that voice that led him here say, "Mum, what is that on the back of the train?" He never heard the answer as the train moved further away. In fear, he clung to the little metal rods at the end, closed his eyes, and hoped he lived. At the moment, he was not sure this was better than living with his aunt and uncle.

Harry had no idea how long he had been gripping the rods to hold on, but his hands were stiff and sore, and it had started getting dark as the thing he was on came to a stop. He was not sure if he should get off or not, so he did his best to listen to what was going on.

As the minutes went by, he heard more and more voices. He guessed people were getting off this thing he was on. He guessed he should get off too, but he just did not know. Still, he reasoned he could safely get off now if he wanted. It was dark enough it would be easy to hide in the shadows. He had easily moved around his aunt's house at night that way. It was the best way to avoid Dudley.

With care, he crept down the stairs. From what little he could see, it appeared that everyone was going the other way, so he made a little

jump off the last stair on to the train platform and quickly made his way over to the nearest bush and squatted by it. Harry was very tempted to run the other way, away from everyone else, but his stomach was starting to tell him that he needed to think about food, and as it was dinner-time, those people should be going to food, too. Not knowing what else to do, as quietly as he could, he followed everyone else, keeping to the shadows the entire time. A few of the shortest people went off a different direction, but since it was only a few, he ignored them and followed the others.

After a short walk, he hid behind a tree and watched the others get up onto something before it moved away. It was hard to see from where he was. Not for the first time did he wish he could see things further away than his elbow. Staying behind the trees and bushes, he crept as close as he could. He could not understand nearly half the words some of the people were using. He also could not figure out what some of them were laughing about. Then again, the only thing he had ever had to laugh at had been the few times his cousin had fallen off his chair when he went to eat.

As the last of the people left, Harry noticed that there was one more of those things that the people had gotten into left, almost as if it was waiting for him. Deciding to be bold again, he all but ran to it. He tossed his little bag up onto the thing, and then climbed up. He had barely made it on when it began to move. More fear came to him as he wondered where he was being taken. Doing his best to ignore the fear, he held on to his bag and the thing he was riding. Again he screwed his eyes shut tightly so he could not see what was happening and wished to stay safe.

A few minutes later, the thing he was on stopped moving. With a great amount of fear, Harry slowly opened his eyes. And then he opened them as wide as they went. In front of him was the biggest thing he had ever seen, outlined by the white ball in the night sky. He had never seen a house that big before in his life. All he could think about was that maybe they had a kitchen he could stay in, eat, and that maybe he could hide there and not have to return to his aunt's house.

With his bag tightly clutched in his hand, Harry slowly climbed down from the wooden thing he had ridden. Very slowly, he made his way towards the two lights on the house. He climbed up some stairs to get to them. When he got there, he found a door. Hopeful, he pushed on it and heard it creak as it opened. With trepidation, he snuck in through the door.

There was more light here on the inside, but he did not know what it was. He had never seen light like this before, and it gave off a soft noise, sort like the stove he used to cook on. Fortunately, the light did not seem to light up everywhere very well, so Harry quickly scampered over to the nearest shadow and tried to decide what to do.

He had no experience to base his decision on. Nothing, of what little he could see, looked normal to him. Other than a lot of muffled voices that were not too far away, it was fairly quiet. So he just sat there thinking. In fact, he sort of pretended it was his old cupboard and that he was sitting in the dark again. In there, he used to think and dream a lot. The problem was, he was not sure what to think about here.

Harry had no idea how long he had sat there before he heard a very clear voice right next to his left ear say, "Hello, who are you?" He jumped backward slightly against the wall and curled up with his arms over his head. It was the safest position when his uncle got mad.

"I think he's lost," another voice said.

"But how could he be? Everyone is at the Welcoming Feast," the first voice said.

"Not everyone," the second voice retorted, "or else we'd be there too."

The first voice sighed, "Don't be such a pompous arse, it's why you lost your head in the first place."

"I did not!" the second voice said angrily. "And I'll remind you not to bring that subject up again!"

Since he had not been hit yet, Harry moved his arms slightly so he could see who was there. He gasped as he saw two silvery figures before him.

At his sound, the two figures stopped looking at each other and looked back down at him. "Perhaps he's an intruder," the first said thoughtfully.

"He's too small for that," the other replied, "but you have a point that someone needs to know. I shall go inform Minerva. You watch him."

Harry saw one of the silvery men move away. He was not sure which was stranger, that he moved without walking, or that he seemed to go right through a wall. Deciding that his eyes had failed him yet again, Harry ignored him and ran a few feet to a rug that was hanging on the wall. Crawling under it as best he could, he turned back to look at the one that had stayed.

"What is your name, my child?"

Harry stared at the silvery man. He did not seem like he would hit Harry, but then maybe the man was just trying to get him to come closer so he could. Harry just sat in his squatting position with one eye looking out and stared.

"Surely you have a name, everyone has a name," the man said after some time. After Harry still did not answer, the man asked, "If you will not tell me who you are, then will you tell me why you are here?" Harry kept quiet. "Hmm," the man mused, "you're too small to be a student and none of the teachers have family your age. You must be magical or you could not have gotten in here. I don't think I've ever met anyone like you in my nearly seven hundred years here."

Harry continued to keep silent; he could not think of a sound or gesture that would help. Nothing the man said made any sense. As he was trying to decide if he should stay here or if he should run and hide, he heard the sound of a door being opened to his left and across the room. Running and hiding somewhere else was no longer an option. He tried to make himself just a little smaller and he clutched his bag a little tighter in fear.

As Albus said his strange words for the evening and sat down to eat, Minerva looked over at him and asked in a soft voice, "Do you know where our missing student and gamekeeper are?"

The Headmaster stabbed at a steak on the serving platter in front of him and pulled it to his plate. With a sigh, he answered her, "No, and I'm now concerned about Hagrid. I know he is sometimes forgetful, but I've never seen him miss the Welcoming Feast. He so loves to take the first years across the lake too."

"True, but I'm more concerned about Mr Potter. I did not get a reply back from him. Did you?"

The old wizard poured himself some water. "No, and the fact that Hagrid was supposed to take him to Diagon Alley, and then take him to the train station gives me even more concern."

"I should hope so," she all but chastised him. "We can not have students go missing. We are responsible for their safety."

She saw him give her a look that said 'he knew', but she felt no guilt in having said it. This was one of those times where she thought the man was too lax in his duties as Headmaster. True, he had a lot to do being Headmaster, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump, plus who knew what else he had a finger in. He was spread too thin in her opinion. "So what do you plan to do?"

He chewed a bite of green beans before he answered her. "I shall have to track him down tomorrow." At her look, he added, "Both hims. I'll start with Hagrid as I expect Mr Potter to still be at his aunt's house. Being Muggles, they probably just binned the letter and told Hagrid to leave."

"Why did you send Hagrid? He would have scared the poor Muggles, perhaps even caused them to do something rash. And Albus," she continued to take him to task, "he can't even use magic to help protect himself." She glanced at her house's table to make sure they were behaving themselves, especially some redheaded twins, before she looked back at her superior, waiting for his answer.

Dumbledore washed his food down and looked around the noisy hall too. "Because he was the one to rescue Harry, and he adored the Potters, so I felt he would like the honor of reintroducing the boy back into our world. Besides, what could hurt Hagrid?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure a lot of things could. You know that no matter how good his intentions are, that man is not the brightest torch in the castle," she reminded him. Another glance around the hall showed her the house ghost coming through the wall by himself. She smiled ever so slightly as she thought about the scare some of the first years were about to get. He always showed up for the Welcoming Feast.

To Minerva's surprise, Sir Nicholas headed towards her, not her house's table. "Madam Deputy Headmistress," he addressed her with a small bob. Sir Nick never bowed, that was problematic for the ghost.

"Sir Nicholas, how may I help you?" She noted the Headmaster raptly watching and listening.

"Madam, I must inform you that there is a visitor in the entryway. I would tell you that you seem to have lost one of your students, but he's far too small to be a student, and I've never known a student to skip the Welcoming Feast."

A completely illogical hope filled the woman -- could it be, she wondered. "I'll return shortly, Albus." She saw him nod to her as she gracefully rose. As she walked around the head table and headed for the doors, she noted a number of students watched her as she passed by. Minerva ignored their stares and their whispers. She continued to hope that the visitor was who she thought it was. If it was not, she was starting to considering rising early and leaving on an errand tomorrow morning, lest Albus delay too long.

The ghost preceded her by gliding through the door. Minerva had to pause to open it. Walking into the entryway a moment later, she saw Sir Nicholas and the Fat Friar standing in front of a tapestry along the wall that had a lump under it at the floor level. She could barely make out a pair of very dirty small feet poking out from underneath. At the

side of the tapestry, she saw what looked like part of a face and some hair, but she was not sure.

As she took her first step in that direction, the hair and the eye disappeared completely under the tapestry. She was not sure what was there. She assumed it was a child based on its size, but she had never seen a child act like that. Minerva stopped a couple of yards away.

In as soft a voice as she could manage, Minerva asked, "Friar, who is that?"

The ghost turned to her. "I'm sorry, Madam Deputy Headmistress, but I do know not. He has not said a word, not even to answer any of my questions."

"It's a boy?"

"Yes, Madam Deputy Headmistress, a very young boy. I would guess he's seven or maybe eight."

Minerva considered the situation. He must be a wizard, the castle wards would not have let him in otherwise. Her hope that his was the Potter boy left her; Potter was eleven this year. Still in a soft voice she said, "Hello? If you'll come out from behind the tapestry, I'll help you find your mum and dad," she saw a head start to come back out, so she added, "then you can go home." The head quickly disappeared again and the lump seemed to move further under the tapestry. That was very strange, she thought; who would not want to go home?

The witch considered what to do. She could easily lift or banish the tapestry, she could even transfigure it into strings or anything else that was easy to see through or move. But she really should do none of that, it was obvious the boy was very scared. After a moment, she decided that maybe a reward would work. "If you'll come out and talk to me, I'll give you a biscuit. I promise I won't hurt you." The lump was very still. "Please come out, I want to help you." Still he did not move.

She pulled her wand out and conjured a goblet of water at the edge of the cloth. "If you'll lift up the tapestry and look by your feet, you'll see some water. You can drink it if you're thirsty." After a few seconds, she saw the tapestry move just slightly as he checked out the goblet. He did not take it, but he was obviously looking at it.

Waiting a full minute still produced no results. Minerva was losing her patience, and yet, she realized she could not. There was something strange happening and she needed to find out what it was. Perhaps another person could think of a better idea.

She stood back up and walked away to the other side of the entryway. As she got there, she saw the hair and eye come back out. It looked at her and then down at the water. Now that she was far away, a small bony hand slowly snaked its way out and grasped the goblet and pulled it in. The head disappeared; she assumed the liquid was being drunk.

"Sir Nicholas?" she softly called. The ghost glided over. "Please go tell the Headmaster not to let the students out of the Great Hall yet, and that I need him to join me here." The Gryffindor ghost acknowledged her request and went through the wall. A minute later, the door to the entryway was opened and the Headmaster joined her.

"What seems to be the problem, Minerva?" His voice seemed to boom in the empty and very quiet room.

"Ssh, as quietly as you can. We seem to have a very scared little wizard under that tapestry, and I can't get him to come out."

"Do you have any idea who he is?" he asked in a whisper. The wizard was hoping for the boy that had not shown up tonight.

"No, he seems to be quite young, maybe seven the Friar told me." The two ghosts were standing to the side watching to see what would happen. "When I mentioned helping him to go home, he retreated further under the tapestry. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he doesn't want to go home."

"Hmm, I've only known one student who's ever told me that, and that was nearly fifty years ago." The Headmaster considered the problem further. "I'm afraid we'll have to take action then. Why don't you levitate the tapestry and I'll stun him. We should then be able to take him to Poppy and figure out something from there."

"I was afraid it would come to that. I fear he won't trust us if we force him out."

"Understood, but I see no alternative if you can not coax him out." He watched and waited on her decision since she was so concerned.

"Very well, but I would suggest you just do it through the tapestry. I saw his hand and it's nothing but skin and bones. I'm afraid a full Stunning Spell would hurt him," she suggested.

"I see, then perhaps the milder Sleeping Spell would be better." Dumbledore pulled out his wand and cast "Quiesco". A light brown beam of magic came out of the wand and hit the bulge in the tapestry. They heard a clatter and then the bulge became shorter and more pronounced.

Minerva hurried over and pulled the edge away from the wall and looked in. Sure enough, there was a small child slumped over. Lifting the tapestry, she pulled him out and looked.

The child had dark longish hair that was just past his shoulders. Clothes, so old and frayed they were almost rags, covered his frail little body. When her search came to his arms, she gasped and almost dropped him. His right arm was very crooked and his right hand was very misshapened, almost deformed looking. Almost worse, both arms seemed to be covered in bruises and small scars.

"Sir Nicholas! Send Poppy!" she commanded.

With strength she did not realize she had, she picked up the boy, who was clutching a paper bag, and strode in angry steps towards the hospital wing. The fact that she hardly noticed his weight, he was so light, did not escape her. It merely fueled her anger more. When she found out who did these injuries to this child, heaven, the gods, and

who knew who else would have to protect them from her. This was beyond criminal.

Entering the hospital wing, she saw Poppy Pomfrey waiting on her. Minerva assumed the school nurse had taken the Floo from a room near the Great Hall to her office in order to beat her there. Realizing this boy was going to need a lot of care, she continued on to one of the quarantine rooms in the back. The nurse followed after her.

"What does he have that you would bring him here?" the nurse asked as she also entered the little room.

Minerva gently laid the child on the bed. "I don't know what's wrong with him, except to say that he looks so mistreated I believe he will be here a long time and require a lot of rest." She put his paper bag on the table beside the bed.

The nurse nodded and pulled out her wand. "Where did he come from?"

"I have no idea. Sir Nicholas found him in the entryway a short time ago and notified me. Albus put a Sleeping Spell on him so we could get to him to bring here. He was acting more like a frightened animal than a boy."

A nod of acknowledgement was all Minerva got as the nurse started performing diagnostic spells -- many diagnostic spells -- far too many diagnostic spells Minerva realized. She watched the nurse and became more concerned as time went on. Poppy's face was becoming very angry looking. As she stopped the spells, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"What's wrong with him?" McGonagall was lightly wringing her hands in worry, although she was not aware of it.

A very angry nurse turned to her. "What's not wrong would be a shorter list!" she hissed and then had to pause for control before she could go on. "I have never believed in executing criminals, but I'm willing to make an exception now."

"I understand, Poppy, I feel the same way. But most importantly for the moment, can you help him? Can you ... fix him?" Minerva did not know what word worked best considering the boy's condition.

"Some of it, but I'm going to need help as some of his conditions are beyond me. I mean look at him. He's on the short side of four feet tall and he's skin and bones. Do you know how malnourished he must be? And look at his right arm. I can't even tell you how many times it's been broken; and the hand! I'll have to remove all the bones and regrow them. I'll probably have to do that for his arm too. That doesn't even begin to account for all of his other bones. I don't think a one of them has not been broken at least once. There's something wrong with his eyes too. I think, though I'm not positive, that he merely needs glasses; but I would bet he can't see more than shapes and colors. And his throat. He never spoke to you, did he?"

Minerva shook her head, she could not speak as the tears started to run down her face as she listened to all the injuries.

"I doubt he can talk. He's had severe injuries to his neck." She had to stop and take a deep breath. "But Minerva, the real tragedy is his head. Things aren't right there either. You tell me he's a wizard, and knowing the wards to the castle, I have to agree; but I can't find his magic."

"You mean he's a squib?" she asked in a whisper.

"No, he has the magical signature of a Muggle. I can find only the barest trace amount of magic in him at all, and yet the wards somehow let him in." The nurse sighed.

Minerva walked over to the child and swept his hair back from his face and gently stroked his forehead. She furiously tried to figure out what they were going to do. Besides doing their best to heal him, probably about all they could do was to contact the Aurors and file a missing, or a found, child report. She continued to caress his forehead absent mindedly as she thought. A gasp grabbed her attention and caused her to look up. Albus Dumbledore had slipped into the room unbeknownst to her, and he was wide-eyed as he looked at the boy. Looking down and really examining his face for the

first time, she suddenly realized who this was. The lightening bolt scar over his right eye was all the identification they needed. Her fury returned full force and it now had a target.

“Albus Dumbledore! Do you realize what you've done?!” McGonagall raised her voice at him to a level not used in years as she stood to fully face him. The Headmaster blanched from the force of her anger and took a step backwards.

“Minerva, hush and don't make a sound,” Poppy momentarily stopped the other witch's wrath. The nurse grabbed a vial from her pocket and hurried over to the boy. As quickly as she could, she poured the contents into him. When she finished, she explained, “He was starting to wake up and I'm afraid of what your fighting would have done to him.”

“What did you give him?” Minerva asked contritely.

“I gave him a Dreamless Sleep Potion. He should be out for the rest of the night. Why don't you step outside and discuss this? It is possible that a loud enough noise could still wake him.” The nurse glared at both of them. All three moved into the main room of the hospital wing.

The moment she was in the clear, Minerva sent off a message spell.

Poppy closed the door to the little room behind them all. “I shall return in a few minutes with some more help. I need to contact St Mungo's,” the nurse informed them as she started to go.

“Poppy? Please don't, we need to take care of this ourselves,” Albus told her. The nurse looked torn between following orders and doing what was best for her patient.

“Go ahead, Poppy,” Minerva told the nurse. “Do your best for Mr Potter. I'm taking charge of him and a whole lot more.” The nurse smiled slightly and moved towards her office and its Floo.

“Wait!” the Headmaster called after her, but the nurse did not stop.

“Albus! You will not interfere with Mr Potter's life again. I am ashamed of myself for not stopping you from your foolish action of leaving him with those Muggles many years ago. What did I tell you?” She did not give him time to answer her in her tirade. “I told you they weren't like us. I told you they were the worst sort of Muggles. I told you he shouldn't live there. I shan't make the mistake of ignoring his well-being again, no matter how good your intentions or what you tell me. His life will be better.”

“You don't know what you're doing, Minerva...”

“I know full well what I'm doing, Albus! I'm making sure that little boy, who had his parents taken away from him and then was very obviously abused, has the best possible chance of recovery and a normal life from now on. I will do everything in my power to make that so.”

“That's not possible...” he weakly said.

“Why not?”

He stopped talking and just looked at her with sadness in his eyes but an otherwise neutral face. As she was about to lay into him for withholding information, the hospital door opened and another teacher walked in.

“Filius, I'm glad you came. Would you seal and silence the doors please.”

“Of course, Minerva,” the Charms professor replied, and did the necessary charms. Albus looked like he was getting a major headache as the short man cast his spells.

“Minerva,” Albus started his plea, “we need as few as possible in on this secret.”

“For the short term, I would agree, Albus, but I'm planning for the long term now.” She turned to her short colleague. “Filius, we have found young Mr Potter. Unfortunately, due to Albus's negligence,” the Headmaster winced, “the boy is going to need extensive medical care.

I surmise, and we will verify this soon, that the abuse was done by his Muggle relatives, as they were who he was left with years ago.” Flitwick looked horrified, while Minerva looked suspiciously at Albus. “In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to learn those people were also responsible for our missing gamekeeper, who never should have been sent after Potter.” She bristled for a second before looking back at Filius. “Therefore, I plan to take over guardianship for the young man and I would like to know if you would help me. I feel there must be accountability and oversight.”

“Of course, Minerva, you can count on me to help Lily's child in any way I can.” There was a fierceness from the short man that some might have found comical, but those did not know his capabilities.

“Thank you, Filius. Lily was a wonderful person, and I can say that James was too, after he grew up at any rate.” She got a smile from the Charms professor.

“Minerva, Filius, I really can't let you do this,” Albus started. “You don't understand everything that's going on.”

The witch was about to lose it with her superior. As she was about to question him on his statement, Pomfrey and two witches in Healer green came out of her office.

Pomfrey held out an upturned hand towards her two guests. “I'd like to introduce Healer Phyllis Tofty, yes, she's related to Oliver Tofty who comes every spring to test; and you all probably already know Healer Delores Diggory.”

“Healer Tofty, Healer Diggory,” Minerva greeted them. “I'll let you work on your patient. Please do everything you can for him. I, or someone,” her eyes flicked over to the Headmaster, “will cover every expense required to make him as fully healed as possible.” The three Healers nodded and then went to see Harry.

As soon as it was only the three professors again, Minerva turned back to the Headmaster. “Albus, that's twice you've said that we don't understand about Harry. Exactly what do you mean by that?” She stared him straight in the eye, compelling him to answer her.

"I can't tell you as it's a closely guarded secret; and besides, with his godfather unavailable, I'm Harry's guardian in the Wizarding world, therefore, I..."

"Not for long," she angrily told him. "Nor will you be Headmaster for much longer either." He started to object but she overrode him in her tightly controlled anger. "When it becomes known what happened to the Boy-Who-Lived and who did it to him, and who put him there, you will not be able to survive the firestorm that will come down upon you. A firestorm led by me!"

"And me!" Filius all but squeaked as he forcefully spoke up.

Minerva nodded at him as he took his place as Harry's co-guardian. "I would suggest that you tell us everything there is to know about Harry and his parents, especially from ten years ago, and then pack your things and resign. Go play Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock, if that's what you want to do, since you seem to prefer scheming and playing political games, but it is plainly obvious to me that you do not care about all the students in the manner that you should, nor do you give them or the school the complete and undivided attention that they and it deserve."

"So you plan to take over?" Albus said with resignation in his voice.

"Yes, that will be one of the last things you do. You will convince the Board of Governors that I should succeed you, and that Filius should be the new Deputy. Give them whatever excuse you want for yourself leaving, but do those things and then never return to Hogwarts again." She watched Dumbledore think about it all; then his hand twitched slightly.

"Don't even think about it, Albus." She commanded him. "You should look at Filius first." The Headmaster looked to his right and saw the small man with his wand already pointed him. When he turned back, Minerva had hers out too.

Dumbledore sighed, defeat in his expression. "And you'll not press charges if I do as you say?"

She glanced at her accomplice and saw a quick nod. "Agreed, as long as you'll make an Unbreakable Vow to not harm Harry Potter again and to work to his advantage for as long as you shall live."

Albus paled. "An Unbreakable? For the rest of my life?"

The stern witch did not back down. "Yes, Albus. Considering the size of your transgression, I feel that nothing less is acceptable. You will make the Vow to me, with Filius to seal it, or we will make every detail of your transgressions in this matter publicly known." Her anger removed any inhibition she had about blackmailing the man.

"I never meant any harm to come to the lad..." he tried to excuse himself, but forgiveness never came from the other two as he looked back and forth between them. With a sigh, he agreed.

The speed at which Dumbledore accepted and moved to start the Vow concerned Minerva. She wondered what else they had yet to uncover. She accepted his hand and the Vow started.

"I, Albus Dumbledore, do swear to not knowingly harm Harry Potter, and to work to his advantage where I am able." He looked up at her for her acceptance.

She tilted her head slightly as she tacked on, "And you will not lie or cover up any information concerning this as you turn matters over to us."

He closed his blue eyes, which were without their customary twinkle, and took a deep breath as he added to his Vow. "And I will not lie or cover up any information concerning Harry Potter as I turn over matters and my position to Minerva McGonagall and Filius Flitwick."

Minerva nodded at her accomplice and he sealed the Vow. They all watched the bands of magic dissipate as the Vow was sealed. There was complete silence as everyone let their hands fall to their sides and they looked at each other.

"We'll need to adjourn to my office for a while if I'm to explain about the Potters." Dumbledore looked tired, very tired.

Before Minerva could say anything, the door to the quarantine room burst open and three angry witches came out.

Healer Tofty stared at Dumbledore as she ground out, "Albus, where has he been living that this could happen to him?"

It was obvious to Minerva that he did not want to answer, as it was obvious Phyllis Tofty was going to get an answer out of him. His recent vow compelled him to answer. "I have yet to verify it, but he should have grown up with his Muggle aunt and her family."

"And whose idea was it to put him there?"

A sigh escaped him. "Mine."

Tofty continued her interrogation with a vengeance. "It appears he's been abused since he was an infant. So why was he never checked on?"

Minerva and everyone else watched Dumbledore place one hand next to his temple and start rubbing. "I simply forgot." He cringed at the shouts directed at him. "Please," he said to get their attention and quiet them down. "Please! I had a plan for an old friend of mine, a squib, to live a few houses down from him and to keep tabs on him. But she got sick at about that time, and by the time she had recovered, I had forgotten to ask her to help me out. I didn't want him abused or anything else bad to happen to him. I don't know why I forgot and I can see why you would think it criminal of me, but it was just a mistake..."

"Why you! I should..."

"Dee!" Minerva grabbed her hand, the one with the wand in it and stopped her from casting a spell. "Dee, I understand as I'd like to hex him too, but we've already agreed that he will resign from Hogwarts, his guardianship of Harry, and he will never come to the school again."

"That's not good enough!" Dee Diggory shouted before her voice started to break. "That's not good enough," she repeated, now with a trembling voice. "Do you know what's been done to him?"

Minerva was afraid to find out, but she needed to know. "What?" she gently asked.

"He's been so abused his entire life, I could not find a happy memory in him anywhere when I performed Legilimency on him to evaluate his mind. No where in eleven years. The closest thing I could find was a scared memory of relief when his uncle abandoned him at the train station this morning, when Harry realized he never had to go back home again." Dee could not stop the tears from coming down her face. "He doesn't even know what his real name is."

"That's not all," Phyllis added a moment later with great concern on her face. "He's had a magical block on him since he was a baby. It was so powerful that he had no magic available to him at all, not to heal himself, to protect himself, anything. I'm afraid to take it off as the backlash of all the pent up magic might kill him."

"Why?" Minerva stared Albus down, again demanding an answer for his actions -- an answer he was now magically bound to provide or suffer the fatal consequences.

"I knew he was going to be living with Muggles and he needed to fit in; he needed to appear normal to them."

Minerva just shook her head at the injustice. "What can we do?"

Phyllis Tofty took a deep breath. "I'm only aware of one option. We put a slightly smaller block on him and then release the larger block to let a little magic into his system. Assuming he survives that, then we do the same thing again and again with yet slightly smaller blocks, until over enough time, his system has gotten used to magic and we've removed the block entirely. However, that will be amongst the last things we do as his body could not presently handle the strain. Poppy and I must help him to get physically stronger before we can even begin to deal with the problem of his magic."

"And because he has no magic at the moment," Pomfrey added, "his healing will take longer. It will be at least a week and probably two before he's strong enough to even attempt that."

"We may need to do one other thing after we do all the healing," Dee told them. "It's possible that the best thing we can do for him would be to do a total Obliviation."

A gasp escaped Minerva. "Total?"

"I'm afraid so," the mind Healer answered. "He has so many bad memories, his behavior is almost not even human in many ways. He'll keep his basic motor functions, but other than that, I'll have to wipe everything else out. He'll be a new boy -- a new Harry Potter."

"What are the drawbacks?" Minerva was afraid to ask, fearing the worst, but again, she had to know.

"There's the obvious that he'll be missing eleven years of his life. That will cause him to start school later than his age group as he'll need a few years of very special and intensive help. Beyond that, there is the slight possibility that he might remember some of it later anyway because some memories escaped being erased. The mind is a very complex and tricky thing," Dee explained.

"And if that happens?" Filius asked when Minerva did not.

"At best, he would be a very ... dedicated champion of those who are oppressed and downtrodden, in any form."

"And at worst?" Filius prompted.

Dee swallowed hard. "At worst he'll become like the one who abused him, except with the power of magic at his command." Everyone went silent. "That probably won't happen, the chances are very, very small; but that is the worst. There's only been a couple of dozen total Obliviations in recorded history, and only one person has acted in that worst case. Most went on to lead reasonably normal lives."

"Reasonably normal?" Minerva had found her voice again after her shock.

"Even relearning a childhood is not the same as having a normal childhood, and the longer the gap, the worse it is. There have been a few other cases of about ten year olds and they all worked out fine. The problems tend to only occur when we have to do this to a thirty or forty year old. I have every hope of Harry recovering and being as normal as any other wizard; but you did ask about possibilities."

"There is one other problem," Phyllis informed them, "but I'm not sure what it is. All I can say is that it's like there are two people in his head."

"What?" several people asked.

"It's hard to explain, because I'm not totally sure, but it's like he's possessed or something because he seems to have two souls or something. I'll do an exorcism on him to remove it." Phyllis noticed that everyone still looked surprised, except for Dumbledore, who looked very thoughtful although he did not say anything.

Minerva broke the silence after the last revelation. "So you know, Filius and I will take over guardianship for Harry. We'd like to ask you to keep this quiet, at least until he's healed and able to deal with the publicity this will almost certainly cause."

Phyllis smiled slightly. "This is going to be a real stunner if it gets out. We'll obviously respect the patient's privacy. That he's a minor should help him. I would also suggest that you keep him in that quarantine room for as long as you can. No students and no other professors should know."

Both Minerva and Filius agreed. "We'll let you return to helping Harry. Filius and I need to start Albus on his road to repentance and resignation."

"For what it's worth, Minerva, I don't think that's enough." Dee's look would have even scared Severus Snape.

"No, I'm quite sure it's not," the Headmistress-to-be replied, "but there really is no way to give Harry back what he's lost, is there?" No one answered as there was no real answer. Minerva pointed at the door and Filius unsealed it for the three of them to go to the Headmaster's office.

The three healers returned to Harry to start him on his road to recovery.

A defeated looking wizard, a determined looking wizard, and an angry looking witch entered the office of the Headmaster in complete silence. Out of habit more than anything, the defeated looking wizard grabbed his tea service and poured three cups. He set the tray down on the desk, around which they were all gathered, and each added sugar and a little milk to their drink. The defeated looking wizard bore the scrutiny of the other two while he considered where to start.

Breaking the silence, a tired voice started the story. "In the early summer of 1980, our own Sybil made a true prophecy." That simple statement earned him two snorts, which brought him a small smile for the first time since dinner hours ago. "I agree that sounds far-fetched, but it is true. It also might be the only real Divination she's ever done." He slowly stood and walked towards his cabinets.

"That's why you keep her here, isn't it?" Flitwick asked.

"Yes, for her own protection," Dumbledore stated as he returned to his desk with his Pensieve in his hands. "For you see, the first part of her prophecy was overheard by a Death Eater and told to Voldemort." He pulled the memory from his mind and played it for them. Above the Pensieve, a ghost-like version of Sybil Trelawney recited the prophecy. The two guardians of Harry Potter sat in shock.

"You mean..." Minerva started but could not finish.

"Yes," Albus answered, confident he understood her question.

She looked at Filius, who looked back at her and asked, "What is the power, Albus?" She thought that was a very good question.

"I can't say, and the tricky part about prophecies is you never really know how to interpret all parts of them until they're over. Some parts are quite clear: young Harry is the potential Vanquisher. Other parts are not so clear: what is the power and how does he use it, when does he do this, and who will win in the end."

"And who was this Death Eater?" Filius asked him.

Dumbledore did not want to answer that, but his magic compelled him. "It was Severus Snape." At their look of shock and anger, he hurried with an explanation. "Please understand that he has repented of his ways and acknowledged the follies of his past. I trust him and believe him in this situation. At great personal cost, he has already provided us with valuable information as a spy before Voldemort lost his fight at the Potters."

McGonagall was not sure whether that was the real truth or not, but she knew that was what he believed. "What else do we need to know?" she queried him.

Albus Dumbledore did his best to explain all that he knew about the fateful Halloween evening in 1981, including information about Sirius Black. The other two absorbed this thoughtfully. Then he surprised her with his next statement.

He smirked at her and part of his twinkle returned. "Now that you know everything that has been going on, are you sure you won't follow in my path of dealing with Hogwarts, the Wizengamot, the ICW, the Ministry, and the war all at once? Harry and the prophecy affect them all."

Minerva thought that was a low blow and rude, but she did not lower herself to reply in kind, at least not too much. "No, Albus. Filius and I will find a good home for Harry to relearn the basics in life so he can attend Hogwarts. Then we will help guide him through school, while focusing on the needs here. We shall leave the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and everything else up to you." He just nodded in acknowledgement. "Since you believe You-Know-Who is at least partially alive, do you know how He survived?"

Albus frowned. "No, not exactly. There are several ways, all of them quite Dark. I do have my suspicions though."

"I would suggest you help Harry by figuring that out and making sure it can not happen the next time those two meet." Filius agreed with her, and the oldest wizard nodded his acceptance of the task.

She went on with her directives. "The three of us will also dismantle that maze you have on the third floor, and we will watch you destroy that object. As I told you before, it does not belong in a school full of children, especially now that you've told me He may still be alive and will want to come after it."

"As you wish. I shall start on that and several other things tomorrow. If I may offer one suggestion before we adjourn for the night?" She nodded. "I'll need to call Severus in, there is a potion that may help Mr Potter greatly."

Filius looked at her and she returned his questioning look. "Albus," he said in his high voice, "you must not mention to Severus that this is for Mr Potter, nor must he know that Mr Potter is even in this castle."

Dumbledore did not look like he agreed, but he nodded to show he would comply. Walking to the Floo, he made a call to ask Severus to join them. A moment later, the Potions Master stepped out of the fireplace.

"You summoned me, Headmaster?" His voice was cool with disdain as he glanced over the other two occupants in the room.

"Severus, if I remember correctly, there is a potion that will repair damaged eyes and make it so the patient can see again. Am I correct?"

Snape nodded. "It destroys the inner parts of the eye and then rebuilds them as they originally were. It's normally only used in severe eye injuries though, and rarely at that, because it's extremely painful and very expensive, not to mention very hard, to make."

The old man took that in. "How much and how long?"

The Potions Master reviewed his memory. "I can make it, but the ingredients alone could easily run a couple of thousand Galleons because they are so rare, and it would take a week of constant work, so I could not make it anytime soon since school is now in session."

Albus reached into his desk and pulled out a large pouch. Handing it to Snape he told him, "Our need is great. Please start on the potion the first thing in the morning. If you need more money, please ask. I shall cover your classes while you are unavailable."

Severus's eyebrows lifted to the top of his forehead in surprise. "Are you sure that's ... wise?" He appeared to realize what he had just blurted out as he quickly added on, "I'm sure you can control them Headmaster, but the potions in the NEWT classes are very difficult."

The Headmaster smiled. "Point taken, Severus. Where I am not completely confident, in those classes I will stick with the book and theory only until you can return and teach the practical portion. This task is very important, Severus." Snape acknowledged his order and left.

Minerva stood and Filius joined her. "We shall return tomorrow and help you pack your office, as well as to destroy the Stone. You can explain the other things we need to know about the school then." Albus gave her a small nod; it was obvious he understood her hidden meaning. She would get to the bottom of everything.

An hour before breakfast, Minerva McGonagall walked into the hospital wing and then into the special room that held her new charge. "How is he, Healer Tofty?" She was the only healer in the room at the moment.

"Doing a lot better than I expected actually. It seems that he does have just enough magic in his system that a Strengthening Potion will help him fairly quickly. So we've changed our plan and will start doing major reconstructive work on him tomorrow. When that is all done and any potential pain he will have to go through is over, we'll Oblivate him and go from there." Tofty still did not look happy, even with this rosier picture.

McGonagall nodded. "I have some good news for you." The healer looked up with hope on her face. "Albus has commissioned our potion master to create a sight restorative potion."

After a gasp, the healer begged her, "Please tell me you're not joking with me..."

"No, Albus has already given the money to Severus to start acquiring the ingredients. Severus says it will take about a week to brew once he has them. Then, he says, the potion will completely rebuild his eyes."

Letting out a large breath, the healer gave a large smile. "That's very good news as I was very concerned about this eyes. We don't keep that Potion at St Mungo's as it's so expensive very few people can afford it, well, and we don't have that many eye injuries that serious."

"I'm quite happy as well," Minerva told her with a small smile.

"Of course," much of the healer's concern returned to her, "we have to get past the magical block first. We'll probably start on that tomorrow and it will take a few days to totally remove it." Tofty paused for a moment before anger came over her as it had last night. "Curse that man!"

"We shall have to hope for the best." Spying the boy's little bag, she went over to it and picked it up. A small wave of motherly concern came over her, so she lightly caressed his forehead before she gently straightened the collar on his hospital pyjamas. "Thank you for your help, Healer Tofty. I shall return tomorrow. I would like to see the block removed."

"My pleasure, Professor. By the way, would you have Professor Flitwick come with you? I might want to have his help with this."

"Certainly, I'm sure he'd want to be here anyway. Good day and good luck!"

Minerva left the room and headed for the Headmaster's office. A few minutes later, she arrived to find the current Headmaster sorting through his things.

“Morning Albus.”

“Good morning, Minerva. May I assume you've checked on Mr Potter?”

She nodded. “He is doing well. Apparently his magical block is leaking just enough to allow potions to work, therefore they believe he'll be strong enough by tomorrow morning to start removing his magical block.”

The old wizard gave a small smile. “That is good to hear. I've started going through my office to see what is here. I've binned a few things, as well as straightened up some things that belong to the school.” He moved over to a shelf and picked up a paper bag. “And this is Mr Potter's. James had lent it to me years ago, so I suppose giving it to you is for the best.”

The witch nodded and accepted the bag. “I have the boy's bag from last night; we can look at it in a moment.” She opened the bigger bag from her colleague and pulled out an Invisibility Cloak. “My word! Where did this come from?”

“James said it was a family heirloom. It has been sitting on the shelf for the last ten years. What did you find in the boy's bag?” He looked at her calmly, though with a hint of curiosity.

She set the cloak down and looked in the little bag. The first thing she pulled out was some rags, which she quickly determined was really a set of children's clothes. With a bit of revulsion at the dirty things, she quickly tossed them in the bin. Next came a old tattered dirty smelly and frayed light blue blanket. She almost binned that too, but stopped herself at the last second as she recognized it from an old memory. For Harry's sake, she set it aside. Seeing a few small things in the bottom, she turned the bag upside down and dumped them all on the desk. They heard a small clink and several quiet thumps.

Looking, they found a Hogwarts invitation letter on top of a piece of cardboard; it was unopened. "Interesting, I'm not sure what to make of it though," the Headmaster commented. McGonagall set it aside.

The next thing she focused on a small something that looked like an old wrinkled sausage. She pulled out her wand and poked it, causing it to roll slightly. "That's disgusting," she muttered before she Vanished it. There was also a little green plastic man about two inches tall that held something in his hands; she set that on the old blanket. Finally, there was a little gold key, and this she recognized.

Albus recognized it too, having handled it a week ago. "Mr Potter's Gringotts key!" he exclaimed.

"How did he get that?" she wanted to know.

"I gave it to Hagrid to give to him. How could it be here?" Albus started scratching his beard.

"Obviously, Hagrid gave it to him," she said somewhat sarcastically.

"Perhaps, perhaps," he absently agreed without conviction. "Or, at least Mr Potter met Hagrid, but that does not explain where our gamekeeper went."

"I believe it is time to start an official search for Hagrid, as well as to have the Dursleys investigated." McGonagall's statement could only be taken as a command, the tone was so severe.

Dumbledore sighed. "I fear you are correct. I shall have Senior Aurors Alastor Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt look into the Dursleys and see what they can find. They can be discreet." He sighed again. "Well, shall we head to breakfast, Minerva? This is a class day."

"Plan on a late night tonight, Albus. I'll have Professor Kettleburn move Hagrid's 'pet' at midnight after the children are in bed, then we'll dismantle the setup you have on the third floor. We can also pack some more after dinner," she told him.

He nodded. "As you wish."

“Trixie!” A house-elf popped in and curtsied. “Trixie, please carefully wash this blanket and toy. Then put them and this letter in my quarters.” The elf took the items and left. The key was safely in her pocket and she would have to find out what was in his vault so she could make sure he had enough money for his years in school.

Albus Dumbledore walked out of his office with his successor close behind him. It was going to be more than a long day; it was going to be a long week.

That evening, four professors approached a locked third floor door. The Headmaster unlocked the door and let Kettleburn enter. The large three headed dog growled loudly. With a wave of his wand, Dumbledore send a strong calming spell to the dog, who quickly relaxed.

“There you go, Karl. Now, if you would be so kind as to return him to the Forest?” the Headmaster said with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

“Certainly, sir.” A moment later, Kettleburn left the room for the front door of the castle with the large dog gently plodding along behind the man, the big chain around the beast's neck clanking with each step of the monster.

With the beast gone, Dumbledore transfigured the trapdoor in the floor back to its original state: a staircase down. That done, he went halfway down the stairs and removed the dangerous plants there with large fireball. In the next room, Flitwick removed his charms, grabbed the correct key, and unlocked the door. McGonagall took several minutes in the next room to remove the chess set. The next room was empty; the troll for it was not due to arrive until next week, and now never would. The succeeding room caused the Headmaster to break a sweat as he removed the Dark fire curse on the room. Finally they strode into the last room.

Albus just stood there for a moment and let them look around the apparently empty room.

“Where is it?” Minerva asked.

Flitwick had been silently doing a spell in the meantime. "Over in the left corner, there's a Disillusioned chest, correct?"

"Congratulations, Filius..."

"That's not very secure," she chastised Albus.

"At the moment, no. I have a magical artifact on order from a friend and I was going to use it to hide the Stone, but alas, the item was delayed in arriving. I suppose it does not matter now." Dumbledore pulled out his wand and canceled the Disillusionment and then he summoned the box to himself. "Well, I shall have to go procure a few drops of Basilisk venom as well as some Manticore venom. Shall we go visit Severus?" He turned and started walking out.

As they came to the "Chess Room", Filius spoke up. "Albus, are the rumors about the Stone true?"

"Which ones, Filius?"

"About it being able to turn lead into gold."

"Yes, quite true. Nicolas and Perenelle are quite wealthy. He has even given me a tidy sum for helping him," Dumbledore said modestly as they came to the stairs leading back up to the room Fluffy had lived in for a while.

"Then before we destroy it, I would like to suggest you create a 'tidy sum' for Mr Potter. Since we don't know exactly what his condition will be, he might not be able to work a normal job, and therefore he should not be penalized. Whatever is created should be put into a vault for him. What do you think, Minerva?" Flitwick looked up at her for her opinion.

She stopped at the door before they went out into the hallway. After a moment, she looked at her colleague, "I would suggest you work with Albus on that task; and I think 250,000 Galleons should allow Mr Potter to live without working -- if that's required.

"No rest for the weary, huh Albus?" Flitwick then laughed.

"Very good then." McGonagall held out her hand and Dumbledore gave her the small chest, which she handed to Flitwick. "We'll see you tomorrow morning at six in your office. I shall also announce that all Potion classes are cancelled to give you enough time to complete this latest task. I would like to destroy this tomorrow, since Nicolas seems to have no more use for it. Good-night."

She received two good-nights and they all went their own way. McGonagall still could not believe Dumbledore had brought the Philosopher's Stone into the Castle when You-Know-Who could still be alive.

A little after lunchtime the next day, a goblin came through the Headmaster's fireplace.

"Grithorn I presume?"

The goblin faced the oldest wizard there. "Albus Dumbledore. You said you had vital business?" He noticed a witch, whom he gave a nod to, and another wizard there, a wizard who must have had goblin blood in his ancestors. To the short wizard he bowed, and was given a bow in return.

"Yes, Grithorn. I have a large amount of gold dust that I need to sell and then deposit the profits. Will you act as our agent in this matter?" Dumbledore waved his arm as if he was introducing someone to point the goblin to small mountain of chests.

Grithorn raised an eyebrow in surprise and went over to inspect them. Pulling a small set of scales out of a pouch around his waist, he waved his hand over them while flicking his fingers and the scales expanded to the same size as the ones found in the bank itself. The wizards and witch waited several minutes as the goblin emptied and weighed the dust in one of the chests. That accomplished, he pulled out some parchment and a quill before he started scribbling madly. A minute or so later, he looked up at them.

"Assuming all the chests have the same amount of gold, by the time we sell them and then subtract our agent's fee, you should have

approximately 251,000 Galleons.” He watched Dumbledore look to the other two, who each gave him a nod.

“That will be most satisfactory,” the Headmaster replied.

“Where would you like the profits deposited?” Grithorn inquired. The witch held out a bank key to him. Taking it from her, he held it for a moment and let his magic work. “Vault 649; that would be the Potter Trust vault?” The witch appeared so surprised at his knowing whose vault that was that she only nodded. “It will be few days before the transaction is complete. Do we have a deal?” He shrunk and put his scales away while he waited for an answer.

“We do,” Dumbledore agreed and bowed.

“I shall send you a detailed statement when the work is done. If you will leave your Floo open to me for a few minutes, I shall transport the chests back to the bank so I can begin.” Not waiting for an answer, Grithorn picked up the chest in front of him and left.

A couple of minutes later, he returned, opened up the Floo to “Gringotts Receiving Dock” and started sending the chests through the Floo. When Flitwick realized what was happening, he pulled out his wand and levitated the chests over to the goblin in front of the fireplace. With a grin showing many sharp and pointed teeth, Grithorn caught each chest and sent them through that much faster. At the end, he bowed to Flitwick and then stepped through himself.

McGonagall shook her head in amazement and to clear the sight she had just witnessed. Ready for the next step, she pulled two phials out of her robes and handed them to Dumbledore. Without a word, he pulled a gold cauldron off of his shelf before he took the Stone out of the small chest sitting on his desk and placed it in the cauldron. Finally, he picked up the phials, opened each of them, and then simultaneously poured them both over the Stone. It immediately started smoking. Albus stepped back and waited. A few minutes later after the smoke had cleared, he looked in the cauldron and saw only some red liquid. With his wand, he Vanished and cleaned the cauldron.

Minerva looked into the clean cauldron. "Very good. I believe you can announce at dinner that the left-hand side of third floor is no longer off limits."

"As you wish," Dumbledore calmly acquiesced. "When you visited Severus this morning, did he say what his progress was on acquiring the ingredients for the eye potion?"

"He said he had them all but one, and it should arrive in a couple of days. Since that ingredient was one of the last and there was some simmering time before it was needed, he said he planned to start tomorrow morning," she informed the other two.

Flitwick smiled. "Our plan is going well then. If you will excuse me, I have one last class this afternoon before dinner." He left with McGonagall following him.

That evening at dinner while everyone was eating, or at least all the professors and most of the students were there, Albus Dumbledore picked up his spoon and tapped it on his goblet three times and then stood. By the time he was standing gazing across the room, the room was totally silent and all eyes were on him. Many curious eyes as everyone was wondering what was going on.

"I hope everyone is having a pleasant evening. I have an announcement to make that should make your lives a little easier." He noticed a few students whispering to each other now, no doubt trying to guess what was coming. "I do realize this is only the third day of school this year, but there will be a slight change from a previous announcement."

"At the Welcoming Feast, I warned everyone to avoid the left-side of the third floor corridor, unless you wanted to suffer a most painful death. I am happy to say that you may now treat that part of the castle as you would any other part, although, I dare say you will now find it quite boring as it contains only a few unused rooms. We had been storing a precious magical artifact, but that artifact has now been destroyed and there is no more danger to anyone."

“Therefore, I thank everyone for withholding their curiosity for these last few days, and I hope you enjoy your pudding tonight. The custard looks very promising.”

As he retook his seat, the talking immediately rose to a dull roar as the students began discussing what he had said. Turning to his left, he asked with a twinkle in his eye, “How long do you suppose it will take them to figure out what was destroyed?”

“Oh, I suspect someone on the staff will let it slip sometime in the next day. Although, since Hagrid is not here, it might take a little longer than it would otherwise.” She took a drink and was about to continue on when she heard something off to her right. Bending forward and looking, she saw the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher suddenly stand with both hands on the side of his head, as if he was trying to either hold it on, or else trying to keep it from exploding. To her, and everyone else's surprise, he started yelling and ran from the Great Hall; his screaming echoing even after he had left.

She looked at Albus, who looked back at her, and they both immediately stood and started running after Quirrell. “Everyone stay in this room!” she yelled as she hurried to find out what was going on, one hand on her hat to hold it on and the other hand drawing her wand.

Despite being nearly eighty years older than her, the Headmaster beat her to the doors. He then proceeded towards the front door. Not seeing Quirrell anywhere, she followed Albus. As they cleared the doors to the castle, on the front steps they found the man they were seeking writhing on the ground still screaming and holding his head. She had just taken that sight in when he arched his back as he screamed one last time before going limp. As she was about to ask Albus what was going on, a specter came out of Quirrell's head and raced for the Forbidden Forest.

“What was that?!”

Dumbledore slowly walked over to check the man on the ground. After a few seconds he stood back up. “He's dead. And to answer

your question, I believe that was the spirit of Voldemort, who had attached himself to Quirrell. Obviously, he was here to steal the Stone.”

“My word! How could we not have known?”

“He must have used some sort of Concealment spell on himself.” He sighed. “I am sorry, but while I shall start the search, you will have to hire a new Defense teacher for the year.”

“How many applicants did you have this year, Albus?”

Another sigh escaped the old wizard. “He was the only one who met the minimum qualifications.”

“I see. I will start giving this some thought.”

With a true smile on his face for the first time in several hours, Dumbledore looked at her and quipped, “Welcome to the role of Headmaster.”

Minerva McGonagall turned to leave the little room where Harry Potter was again sleeping. She looked at Filius beside her and it looked like he was having as much trouble holding his breakfast down as she was. The last half hour had almost been traumatizing to watch, the little boy had been put through so much pain and agony. However, in the end, Healers Tofty and Diggory had successfully put a smaller block in place and then removed the large magical block on the little boy. Since he had survived that, they both assured the two professors that Harry would survive the rest of the procedures to completely remove the block -- the first was the trickiest and only potentially fatal step.

Leaving the little room and entering the main room of the hospital wing, she found two Aurors waiting for them. She was not totally surprised to see them.

“Good morning everyone,” a stern witch only a few years younger than McGonagall herself greeted them.

“Good morning, Director Bones, Auror Shacklebolt,” Dumbledore returned the greeting. “How may we be of assistance to you?”

“I understand a man died here last night, plus Auror Shacklebolt has already started an investigation on some Muggles abusing a little wizard boy. I thought that perhaps we all needed to have a chat. Things seem to be a little too lax here.”

“Perhaps we should adjourn to the Headmaster's office?” McGonagall suggested. “I think that would be a more appropriate place for this discussion.” Bones seemed surprised for the idea to come from McGonagall, but she nodded and followed the three professors.

Once in the office, McGonagall led them to the little sitting area, those without a chair conjured one for themselves.

“Which topic would you like to discuss first, Director?”

“Let's discuss the little boy,” Bones directed.

“I'm sure Auror Shacklebolt has told you what happened the other evening,” McGonagall started, Albus was staying quiet. “Since then, the healers have determined that he will live and they will be able to repair all of his physical problems over time. They will have to do a total Obliviation, however. Given that this all seemed to be caused by young Potter being placed in a Muggle home with no oversight, Filius and I have taken over the role to provide that oversight. Our plan is to find a nice Wizarding couple who can help Harry with his special needs and gently bring him back into Wizarding Society, still with our oversight, probably on a monthly basis.”

Bones sat there for a moment and considered that. “Given the present political climate, I will give you my stamp of approval. There's no telling what shenanigans Fudge would try to pull if he got his hands on Mr Potter. However, I'm giving you warning now that my department will also be watching this case very closely.”

“I understand. There is a way you can help us with this task, but we can address that at the end.”

The head of the MLE raised an eyebrow, but continued on with the original topic. "Auror Shacklebolt has investigated the Dursleys. His report is not pretty. The short version is that we have found out what they did to Mr Potter and it is abhorrent. We have also found out that Mr Dursley killed Rubeus Hagrid with a gun..."

"Oh my!" McGonagall exclaimed.

"No!" Flitwick shouted.

Dumbledore merely closed his eyes and dropped his head, obviously considering his mistake of sending the man to the Muggles.

"I'm sorry, but it's true. Apparently Mr Dursley felt threatened by our world and by Mr Hagrid specifically when he showed up on their doorstep. A double-barrel shotgun blast to the chest at close range was the cause of death."

A very pale McGonagall hoarsely got out, "What's going to happen now?"

"We've planted enough evidence to show that a little boy was once in their home, that he was abused and then murdered; and we've made sure the Muggle authorities have investigated and found that evidence. While Mr Potter was not murdered, that scenario will make sense to the Muggles and covers all the crimes that the Dursleys should be charged with. At this time, it appears that the two adults will be spending a very long time in prison after they have a trial and the son will go to live with his aunt after a long treatment in one of their mental institutions," Bones concluded.

"That is all so horrible."

"Yes, Professor McGonagall, but then my job has shown me that humans are horrible at times. Unless you have other questions on that, I'd like to discuss the death here last night." Bones looked around and no one said anything.

"Very well," Bones continued, "I have read the report from last night and I have two problems with it. One, even in a world of magic, I find

it very hard to believe that you think You-Know-Who was here; and two, if that is true, how did that happen and you didn't know it before then?" After a moment of silence, she noticed that two of the professors were looking at the Headmaster.

"Yes, well, I suppose that falls to me," Dumbledore finally spoke up. "It has always been my theory that young Mr Potter did not totally kill Voldemort ten years due to some form of necromancy that Voldemort performed to gain immortality. What we saw last night when his wrath escaped was the proof of that theory."

"Do you realize how incredible that sounds, Albus?"

"Yes, Director, I do. However, I will also submit that it is the complete truth."

Bones considered that for a moment. "And how do you explain how He came here and stayed here undetected?"

"It is my theory that he forced Quirrell to cast a Concealment charm on him so we would not detect his aura. Of course, after I announced that the Philosopher's Stone had been destroyed and was no longer here last night, Voldemort no longer needed Quirrell, as that path to regain a body was no longer available to him."

"I see..." The head of the MLE looked amongst the three professors for a moment before zeroing in on Dumbledore again. "And what will you do to prevent this from happening again?"

"Actually, that's what I would like to talk to you about, Director." McGonagall reentered the conversation. "We now need a new Defense teacher and we need a good one who has some real life experience. I was hoping to be able to convince you to loan us one of your Aurors for that teaching position. We would even reimburse you that salary."

The director was very surprised. "I'm not sure I have the staff, especially if I need to start ramping our numbers back up."

"I understand," McGonagall conceded. "However, I'm hoping you may have qualified personnel who are on leave of some type but who can still teach, or perhaps some of the retired staff you have on reserve."

"That might be workable." Bones considered that some more. "Since this affects my department, I'd like to know why you're asking instead of Albus. Although I think I can guess, I'd like to hear your version."

McGonagall smiled pleasantly. "Albus is about the hand the Headmaster job over to me so he can concentrate on the Wizengamot and other interests he has. This would also be to your advantage as he can help you at the Ministry to get more Aurors on staff."

Bones considered that for a moment, also looking to Shacklebolt who continued to just listen. "You've confirmed at least one of my thoughts. Another one is that there is more to this story than you're telling me."

"There were no laws broken that I'm aware of, Director," McGonagall assured her. "The rest is merely some internal school laundry that we'd rather clean ourselves."

Nodding slowly, Bone said, "I see." Turning to her employee, she asked with a slight smile, "I believe Thad Williamson was complaining the other day about getting too old to run around with the 'young ones'?"

"Yes, Director, I do believe those were his words," Shacklebolt agreed.

"Very well. Minerva, you may expect to have a new Defense teacher in the morning. We'll work out the accounting later."

"Thank you, Director. You are most helpful."

"You're welcome. And be careful with Mr Potter. We will be watching to make sure all the proprieties of the law are observed with him."

"We understand."

Filius was nodding his agreement with Minerva's statement. "Yes, Director, we would appreciate any help you, personally, might give us."

As the two Aurors left, Minerva looked at the other two. "I believe we all have classes shortly?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned and left what would be her new office soon. That reminded her that she was going to have to find a new Transfiguration teacher and a new head-of-house for Gryffindor soon. There were some other staffing changes she wanted to make, but they could wait a while.

As the second week of class ended, Severus Snape went over to his superior as dinner was ending. "Headmaster, the potion you requested has completed. If you will accompany me, I will give it to you." He notice Minerva seemed interested in this as well, but he ignored her.

"Certainly. I believe Minerva might like to come as well?" The Headmaster looked at her.

"Yes, thank you." She turned the other direction. "Filius? Would you come with us as well?"

"Oh, I'd be delighted," the little man said.

"Really," the potion master drawled. "There is no need for everyone."

"I don't see any problem," Minerva told him. "This is a very interesting potion I'm told. I'd like to hear about it." Flitwick agreed.

Seeing that the Headmaster was smiling and not saying anything, Snape spun on his heel and headed for his office. As he walked in silence, he considered what was happening around him. He had been very busy with this potion, but he still had seen Minerva spending a little more time in the Headmaster's office than what was usual. Also, Filius was spending a great deal of time around Minerva. Something was up; he would have to watch closely to see what he could do to benefit himself the most.

He opened his office and let everyone in, closing the door behind them all. Snape strode to his desk, his cape billowing behind him; he

rather liked that effect, as well as the fact that his cloak helped to keep him a little warmer in the dungeons. On his desk was a small brown flask, which he pointed to. "Who will be administering this?"

"We will be giving it to a healer who has a patient with severe eye injuries," Albus calmly stated.

Snape nodded and he was relieved to hear that. This potion was potentially very dangerous. "Then he will know that there must be no other potions in the patient's system when you give them this, and it must be totally consumed in one minute or less."

The Headmaster nodded. "Anything else we need to pass along for safety?"

"No, Headmaster; other than you have seventy-one hours from now to administer the potion before it's worthless."

"How long will it take and what will it be like?" McGonagall asked.

He wanted to snap at her and tell her it was none of her business, but by the look on the Headmaster's face, apparently it was. "The patient will be in extreme pain for an hour while the eyes and optic nerves are destroyed. Then for the next eleven hours, there will be tingling, like Skele-Gro produces, as it's all rebuilt." He saw a horrified look on her face. "In the end, the patient will see as if he had perfect eyesight, their original shape and color too." Finally, a pleased look came over her at the very end. Flitwick continued to just stand there absorbing the information with a curious look on his face.

Snape watched Minerva pick up the brown bottle with great care, then she actually smiled at him, for the first time ever. "Thank you, Severus; I shall remember this." Fortunately for him, she had already turned around to leave, as had Flitwick, so it was only Dumbledore who saw his jaw drop.

Minerva sat in the hospital wing. She had no pressing duties at the moment, as it was a Saturday morning. She looked at Filius beside her and found comfort in the tear going down his cheek, one to match the multiple tears going down hers. The screaming had stopped a few

minutes before, but that did not stop her from caring about the little boy who was in pain.

The door to the little quarantine room opened and Healers Tofty and Diggory came out.

"How did it go?" Flitwick asked.

Tofty smiled. "It appears to be working just fine. All the old damaged tissue is now gone and we can already detect the growth of new tissue. It will be another eleven hours before we can take the bandages off, but I believe his eyesight will be fully restored."

"Thank you," Minerva whispered before she suddenly shot out of her chair to give Tofty a hug. "Thank you so very much."

"Minerva?" the other healer asked in an unusually tentative voice.

"Yes, Dee?"

"What's going to happen to Harry now? Where will he go live?"

"We're going to find him a good home where he can be loved and raised to know who he really is. The hard part will be finding someone who can help him with his special needs. He's going to have to learn a lot very quickly before he can come to school here."

Dee nodded. "I, uh, well, Amos and I would like to apply for that. You see, we always wanted another child, but I couldn't have one for some reason..."

"That's very kind of you, but how will you handle working and Harry too? He will be a full-time job for someone."

"I would take a leave of absence." Dee saw her colleague give her a raised eyebrow; she had not mentioned this idea to anyone but Amos. "As a mind healer, I think I would have the best skills to help Harry. We really don't need my salary, and Amos would like another son too. Cedric is a wonderful son, but we have more love to give."

Minerva looked at Filius. The small man smiled at her before he looked at Dee. "Perhaps you and Amos could come talk to us tomorrow afternoon? I know only of good things about you two, and Cedric is a very well behaved young man, even if he is not in my house."

"Perhaps at two tomorrow afternoon?" Minerva suggested.

"Thank you, both of you." Dee Diggory looked very happy.

Minerva felt that little Harry's life was looking up at last. She could not imagine anyone more qualified to help him at the moment. As September changed into October, so change swept through Hogwarts. On the first of October, all four heads-of-house made sure all of their students were at dinner. Other than an extra person sitting at the head table, everything else looked normal. The students were speculating on who the new person was.

When most people had finished dinner and were starting on the various pies and other dishes in the pudding course, Dumbledore tapped his glass three times and stood. A hush quickly descended on the Great Hall.

"May I have your attention," he said needlessly. "I have some announcements. I must inform you that I am sad to say that today is my last day as Headmaster at Hogwarts." Chaos reigned for nearly a full minute as everyone started talking and then shouting to their neighbor. To restore order, Dumbledore pulled out his wand and shot a large number of red sparks into the air; the crowd quieted.

"Thank you for your concern, but I have other things which I must do and now seems to be the right time to do them. However!" He dramatically paused, "You shall be lead very capably by Professor McGonagall, who will be the new Headmistress." Applause broke out from three of the tables, the fourth table made the motion of clapping, but no sound seemed to come from that direction.

Holding out his hand as if to introduce her, Dumbledore announced, "Professor Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts."

McGonagall stood at her place. She would move to the golden chair tomorrow, as Filius would take her present chair.

“Students and staff, I am honored to be elected the new Headmistress by the Hogwarts Board of Governors.” She saw Draco Malfoy say something to the boy next to him and then silently chuckle. “All of the fine traditions and efforts that make Hogwarts the best magical school in Britain will continue.” She received polite applause. “There will be a few changes, which I hope will be for the better. The first being Professor Filius Flitwick will become the Deputy Headmaster.”

There was applause all around, although the loudest was from the Ravenclaw table. He was a popular teacher with everyone, even the Slytherins.

“As I step up, we will have a new Transfiguration teacher. Please welcome a friend from my school days, and also the new Gryffindor head-of-house, Professor Frances Washburn.” She pointed to her left and to a witch that looked only slightly younger. The new professor stood and waved before retaking her seat.

“Other changes will undoubtedly occur over time, all hopefully for the better. I encourage each of you to do your best and to show why Hogwarts is such a wonderful place to learn. Enjoy your dessert and you may leave when you wish. Staff, please come to the staff lounge for a few minutes after dinner for a toast.” Minerva sat back down, mostly pleased with her speech. After their initial reaction, the students seemed very accepting. Shortly, she would find out whether the staff was as accepting.

Fifteen minutes later, the staff was all together and glasses were being passed out. When she saw that everyone had one, she raised hers. “To Albus Dumbledore, thank you for your years of excellent service to Hogwarts. May your further adventures be good ones.”

Everyone raised their glasses to the old wizard and murmured, “Here, here.”

To start the ball rolling, she put her glass down and shook Albus's hand. "Thank you for your help, Albus," she told him sincerely. "I may call you from time to time with questions."

"You're welcome, Minerva. I can't think of a better person for the position, and I think you'll do a wonderful job."

She truly appreciated his blessing and that he had done so in front of the rest of the staff. Stepping back, she let everyone else come up to him to wish him good-bye. Some took quite a bit of time to say good-bye. She watched them all, waiting for one specific person. Near the end, he too wished the old Headmaster good-bye. When he turned to leave, she fell into step beside of him.

"Severus, would you spend a few minutes with me?" She saw the man blanch slightly before he recovered his normal expression and nodded. "I think my new office would give us the privacy to discuss a couple of things."

"Of course, Headmistress," he drawled, much more respectfully than normal.

No, he was not stupid, she thought as they walked side by side. She would give him one last chance to prove it to the school at large.

Entering her new office, which was a bit bare at the moment, her things not having been moved yet, she took a seat in the sitting area, hoping its more casual setting would help. She pulled out her wand and heated the teapot there before she started pouring. "A cup for you, Severus?"

"No thank you, Headmistress."

He sat very straight-backed she noticed. She took a sip before she launched into 'everything'.

"Severus, neither of us likes beating around the bush, so I'll just be blunt. Although your skills with potions is rivaled by few, I have never liked the way you have acted here. You're mean-spirited, biased, and I have an entire drawer of complaints against you about your

inability to teach and unfair actions.” If it was possible, his sallow complexion seemed to pale even more.

“However, not long ago you performed a very good deed and I told you that I would remember that, so I am keeping that promise to you now. Perhaps against my best judgment, I will not sack you immediately. Instead, I will give you one last chance to redeem yourself. If you can turn over a new leaf and be respectful to all students, not just the Slytherins, and if you can teach everyone fairly, and I do mean teach, not just sneer and point them to their book, then you can continue here and I will forgive past actions. If you choose to leave, I'll be happy to write a glowing letter of reference extolling your ability as a Potions Master.”

After she stopped talking, Snape looked at her, obviously thinking carefully. “Would I remain the Slytherin head-of-house?”

“If you can help them become normal members of the school, getting them to push away Death Eater-like actions, then yes. If you feel you can not do that, or refuse to do that, then I can give that position to someone else and you may concentrate only on teaching Potions. The choice is up to you.”

“Respectfully, I believe you have an impossible goal.”

“And respectfully, I disagree,” she replied, doing her best to keep an even tone. “The school handbook allows me to suspend and expel those who act with disrespect and violence in the school. If that means I have to expel half of Slytherin house to have a peaceful and nurturing environment, I will.”

Snape was so surprised he gasped.

“Before you say anything, know that I realize that many of the Slytherins are not bad. Many of them are neutral, and some are not inclined to do the wrong thing but are merely led astray, possibly forced into bad behavior by peer pressure of the few really bad ones. So probably, I would only have to expel about fifteen to twenty-five percent of them. But I don't want to do that, which is why we are having this conversation.”

"I see..."

"Can you give me your answer now, or do you need a little time to think it over?" She patiently waited while he seemed to think about it.

Eventually, he told her, "I'll get back with you tomorrow, if you don't mind."

"As you wish. However, I do have one request of you for this evening." He raised one eyebrow briefly. "As I have asked Filius and Pomona, and Frances and I are about to do for the Gryffindors, please address your house and explain to them that they will be held to higher standards of conduct than in the past. That includes not using the term 'Mudblood' unless they are writing an essay in their History class about how our culture used to use that term and now it is considered inappropriate." As he started to open his mouth, she went on, not giving him the chance to interrupt. "And I don't care who anyone's father is. If they break the rules, I will document it and then take the appropriate action, regardless of their house. If anyone doesn't like it, they're welcome to withdraw from school; there are other children who would like to attend here that we had to turn away. They are to behave like Salazar Slytherin, who was a very noble man from what I've read. Behaving like junior Death Eaters will not be tolerated in any fashion."

He nodded. "I'll pass the message along." At her slow nod, he got up and left.

A very troubled Severus Snape slowly walked to the dungeons to deliver what he knew would be a very unpopular message to a significant fraction of his house.

The next morning, Headmistress McGonagall was bustling around her office trying to put her things in their place as fast as she could. She very briefly considered asking the house-elves to do it for her, but they would not know where to put anything. They had been very helpful in packing her things into boxes though.

As she put some of her favorite transfiguration awards on the wall, there was a knock at her door. Considering it was before breakfast, she was surprised. "Enter!" she called out.

She knew she should not have been, but she was surprised to see Severus Snape standing there, looking as he ever did, except for the bags under his eyes as if he had not slept last night. He also had a piece of parchment in his hand. "Severus? Do come in. Would you like something to drink?"

"No thank you, Headmistress."

This was one of few times she had ever seen him with an almost normal looking expression on his face. "What can I do for you this morning?"

He hesitated before he finally asked, "May I stay here until the end of this term? I would like to leave, but in all fairness to my Slytherin students, I need to delay my departure."

"Can you improve your teaching ability and demeanor until then?"

"I believe so, although I'm not sure about that in regards to the Weasley twins," a spark of his normal sneering self reasserted itself for a moment before it disappeared again under his new mask.

"Then you are welcome to stay until the end of the term. That might be best away." Yes, she thought, it might take a while to track down Horace Slughorn or someone else to fill his position. "If it makes you feel any better, I share your exasperation with the twins."

"Thank you," he softly and uncharacteristically told her. "As a peace offering, I'll give you this."

She took the parchment he held out. Looking it over, she saw nearly twenty names on it. "These are obviously all Slytherins, but why are they on this list?"

"Those are the students you will want to keep a close eye on. As you can see, some of them are from very prominent families, so your

evidence to expel them will need to be very obvious and incontrovertible.”

McGonagall graced him with a slight smile. “Thank you, Severus. I appreciate your help. If you decide that the new you likes it here, you are welcome to stay.” He nodded and then left.

Pleased with where things stood with the Slytherin house, she walked over to her desk and put the list down. She would start monitoring the hallways very closely, in both her cat form and with an Invisibility Cloak she had recently purchased. Looking at her To-Do list, she was also pleased to see it growing smaller. In addition to the Slytherin problem, as she called it, she was going to get to cross the Harry Potter problem off tomorrow.

The boy had been awake for the last two weeks and had been improving greatly in health. He now had perfect eyesight and she was pleased to see Lily's green eyes in him. The injuries in his throat had indeed caused vocal problems, but the healers had been able to fix that too. The growth potions had helped him grow an inch a week for the last couple of weeks, and he would continue to take them until he was his proper size. All his bones had been fixed and most, but not all, of his scars had been removed. The rest of his scars, including the one on his forehead, were now very light and hard to see. Minerva and Dee had decided that, when he was old enough, the would tell Harry he had been in an accident and had received the scars that way. It was close enough to the truth, from Minerva's viewpoint, that she did not have a problem with the explanation.

Sadly, they had had to Obliviate him. He had been afraid of any adult that had walked into the room. Mentally, he was now like an infant, but he seemed to be picking things up quickly. He could now feed himself and walk around, so that was good. On the bad side, they had had to put nappies on him again. Dee had hoped to avoid that. There had been no magical outbursts yet, but that would probably be coming soon she guessed. He was to the point that medically, he could now go home. For at least the next year, he would be known as Harry Diggory.

Delores Diggory sat on her front porch, sprawled in a chair with her eyes closed, and thinking about her new son; she almost appeared to

be asleep. If anyone had asked, she would say that she was taking a break; she knew that lately she felt like she always needed a break. She had no idea how much work it would be to take on the task to raise Harry Potter when she and her husband had volunteered nearly nine months ago.

To say that he was full of energy would be an understatement in the extreme; the boy hardly ever slowed down. He was also extremely curious, which was a dangerous thing when added to his energy level. About the only time she could get him to slow down was when he was reading, which he did just often enough for her to catch her breath. Fortunately, it was getting easier as he started acting older. She supposed it was harder on her because she had determined to document the whole thing, not only for his sake, but for medical history. She had worn out numerous dict-o-quills trying to keep up.

She and Amos had truly enjoyed having Harry in the house. The motherly instincts helped her to ignore most of the bad and concentrating on the good times. The bad had actually been quite minimal, mostly confined to Harry's ability to do accidental summoning. At the beginning of the Christmas holidays, Dee and her husband had sat down with Cedric and told him about the little boy who no longer had a family and that they were adopting. They also told them that their love for him had not changed at all. Cedric had been very accepting of the situation and of Harry when he met him.

At the moment, she was sitting on the front porch and watching Harry fly on his new broom. Amos had finally given him permission to use Cedric's old one. Harry had quickly outgrown the training broom they had bought him for Christmas. She smiled as she thought back to the holidays. Cedric had had a lot of fun teaching his new little brother to fly. According to Cedric, he was a natural.

Besides being a good flyer, Harry was also a quick learner. He learned so quickly it was like magic. He soaked up new information and quickly put it to use, sometimes in surprising ways. She was not sure if that was because of natural ability, or from something to do with his past, or because he had been Obliviated, or what. Still, it had its distinct advantages. He was acting like an eight year-old and she suspected that he would be ready for Hogwarts by this fall. That was

both good and bad, depending on if she was thinking like a mind healer or a mother. She had enjoyed the time with him; he was a wonderful child.

Deciding she better go in and start lunch, she got up and just as she made it to the front door, the alarm on the Floo went off. An unauthorized person was trying to come through. Drawing her wand, while hoping she did not have to use it, she called to her son. "Harry! Come down!"

"Mum! I just got started!"

"Harry, come here immediately! Emergency!" True to his training, he immediately zoomed down to her, dismounting at the bottom of the porch steps right in front of her. 'Emergency' was their code word for danger and Harry was to do whatever they said without questions. In return, they had promised never to use it unless it really was an emergency.

"What's wrong, Mum?" he asked with both excitement and worry.

"It's the Floo alarm, dear. Come inside and stay by the front door," she ordered quickly. "If I tell you to run, you run through the front door and fly away like we've taught you. If I tell you to come, come running to me. Understand?"

"Yes, Mum," he agreed as he went into the house with her.

The Floo alarm changed to a softer buzz, indicating someone was trying to call her now.

Walking towards the Floo warily, she looked back to make sure her son was staying by the front door, in case this was an attack. The possibility of that was why they now had a restricted Floo. She waved her wand at the Floo to accept the call.

"Who is it?"

A face appeared in the fire and an emotion filled voice answered her. "Dee! I'm glad I found you. We need you here at the hospital."

"Trish? I can't, I'm on leave..."

"Dee, there's been a major explosion at the Ministry; multiple levels have collapsed and it's a disaster." The words were rushing out, seemingly without a breath being taken. "We need everyone with medical training. We have more injured people than we can handle. Phyllis told me to call you, and you haven't been answering. I even tried to come through to find you, but your Floo wouldn't let me. Please!" The desperation was very evident in her voice.

That explained the alarms, Dee thought. "I'm sorry, Trish, I can't. I have someone here who can't be left alone and I have to take care of..."

"Dee, people are dying. Can't you find someone to watch him or her? We really need you!"

"I ..." She stopped to think. Getting a hold of Amos was normally an exercise in futility during the day, and if there was a major accident at the Ministry, she would never find him. That made her wonder if her husband was all right.

"Please?" Trish begged again.

"I'll try, Trish, but no promises."

"Thanks Dee! We'll see you soon!" The face left before Dee could say anything.

The mother sighed. Who was she going to get? Most of her family had died in the last war, and those that had not had left Britain. Amos had one sister, but she was a squib and could offer no real protection for Harry.

Suddenly an idea came to her. There was one person nearby whom she could trust. Grabbing some Floo powder, she tossed a pinch in. "The Burrow!" Leaning into the fire, she felt her head stretch and then move, seeing only a couple of grates go flashing by before she saw a different living room. "Molly? Molly Weasley?"

"Hello?" the voice called out before the body it belonged to walked into the room. "Who's there?"

"Molly, it's me, Dee Diggory."

"Dee, how are you doing? I've haven't talked to you in such a long time..."

"Molly, I'm sorry to be short, but St Mungo's has called me about an emergency and I need to go, but I can't because I'm watching someone. Could you help? Just for a few hours?"

"Of course, Dee, I'd be happy to. Who is it?"

"We, uh, adopted a boy."

"Oh, I'm so happy for you! Sure, just bring the little tyke over and I'll watch him for you. I'll even get my little one to help. She'll be happy to have something to relieve her boredom."

"Thanks, Molly! I'll be there in a few."

Pulling her head out of the fire, she smiled to herself. "Little tyke, Molly is going to be surprised. Harry!"

The boy came running in. "Is everything okay, Mum?"

"We're going to be fine, but your mother has to go help some people at the hospital. I'm going to take you to a neighbor's house, and you can stay there until I or your father can come to get you." She was doing her best not to think about the fact that Amos could be hurt if what Trish said was true. "Her name is Molly Weasley and she's a very nice lady. She even has a daughter about your age that you can play with."

"A girl? No way!" He started to back away and realized he still had his broom in his hand when he hit himself on the leg with it. Harry looked at it and then back at his mother. "Do you think she can fly?"

His mother smiled to herself. "I don't know, you'll have to ask her. Now, stand still a minute, I need to cover your scar."

"You mean like you do when we go out to shop?"

"Yes, Harry, just like that. I trust the Weasleys, but we still don't want anyone to know about you yet so we can keep you safe." With a swirl and a tap, she touched her wand to the boy's forehead and his faint lightening bolt scar disappeared and would remain that way for the next twenty-four hours.

Standing up, she walked to the doorway and shot a couple of spells at the front door. It closed and locked. Coming back to the fireplace, she held out her hand. Harry knew to take it and hold on; he still had his broom in his other hand. Dee threw a handful of Floo powder in and said, "The Burrow!" Stepping in with a firm hold on Harry, they both soon stepped out of the Weasley's fireplace.

Other than a strange room, the first thing Harry saw was a thin little redheaded girl about his height. She had a few freckles on her face and two pigtails of long red hair. The girl looked at him and then to her right. Harry saw a woman who was a little older than his mother, or so he thought. She had red hair too.

"Molly? This is Harry. He recently came to live with us. Harry, this is Mrs Weasley."

Harry saw the woman bend over a bit to get a good look at him. "Hi, Harry dear. It's nice of you to come over, although I must say you are a wee bit bigger than what I was expecting." For reasons he did not understand, the woman and his mother laughed. Reaching a hand out, she placed it on the shoulder of the girl. "This is my daughter, Ginny. Perhaps you two can play together this afternoon. Have you had lunch yet? We were about to have lunch."

"I have to run, but thank you so very much, Molly."

"What's the emergency? I haven't had the wireless on."

“Oh, I, uh,” how do I tell her this, Dee thought. “Something happened at the Ministry is all I know.”

“Arthur!” The woman turned very pale, Harry noticed.

“I'm sure it's not all that bad, and besides, I've heard Arthur is out of the office a lot, anyway,” Dee tried to encourage her.

“Hopefully,” Molly said. “You better go dear. Hopefully, nothing happened to Amos, too...”

His mother gave him a quick hug and then she was gone.

Mrs Weasley took a deep breath and then looked back down at the two children again. “Well, why don't both of you come with me into the kitchen and we'll find some lunch. Would you like a sandwich, Harry?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She smiled at him. “My, aren't you the polite one. I'll have to get you to teach Ginny's brother Ron that. He's about your age. Are you ten?”

They walked into the kitchen. Harry stood near Ginny so he was not in the way, but he was careful not to be too near her.

“No, I'm eleven. I'll be twelve this summer,” he said proudly.

“Oh? Then why aren't you at school in Hogwarts?”

He watched her get some things out of the cold cabinet as she started making sandwiches. “Uh, I don't know. Mum said I wasn't ready. I had to learn how to read and write first, and I just did that right after Christmas. I got a broom at Christmas, then I got Cedric's old broom just last week.” He held it out excitedly to show it off.

“That's wonderful, dear. You can set it over there by the door until you need it.” There was something about the woman that made him wonder if she really meant it was wonderful. She looked more like his mother when she was puzzled by something. With a small shrug, he

set his broom against the wall. With a few flicks of her wand, all the ingredients started flying together and a few seconds later there were three sandwiches. She put them all on plates and then handed two of them to the children. "Here you go, take these to the table. I'll bring drinks. Is pumpkin juice all right with you, Harry?"

"Yes, ma'am." He took his plate and followed Ginny. When she took a chair, he decided it was best to sit on the other side of the table from her. Cedric had said he had to be careful with girls; they could give boys cooties, whatever those were -- but they sounded bad.

Mrs Weasley brought in a plate for her, as well as three drinks and bag of crisps. Her food was just as good as his mother's.

"Do you like to fly, Harry?" she asked with a smile.

"Yes! It's the greatest thing ever. My brother says I'm a natural, whatever that is."

She chuckled. "He means that you learned to fly very easily. Ginny flies, too. Perhaps you two would like to fly together?"

He looked at the girl. "You can fly?"

"Of course!" She looked a little mad that he might think otherwise. "I've been flying for years. I bet I can fly better than you."

"Ginny?" Her mother spoke her name in a warning voice.

"Yes, Mum?" she asked innocently.

Her mother closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "Be nice or you won't go flying with Harry."

"Yes, Mum," she said contritely.

"So, Harry, what else do you like to do besides fly?" Mrs Weasley asked him.

"Lots of things, whatever my mum wants. We play school most of the time. I've learned a lot of things. Most of the time, I read things and then we talk about them." He shrugged and finished up his sandwich before he grabbed a second handful of crisps.

"I see. Do you like to swim?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know; I've never done it."

"You've never gone swimming? It's one my most favoritest things to do," Ginny exclaimed.

"Ginny, that's most favorite," her mother corrected her automatically, still puzzling over something.

"Sorry, Mum, most favorite."

Harry watched the woman smile at her daughter; it was a lot like what his mother did. Noticing that the girl's sandwich was now gone as his was, he asked, "So, you wanna go fly?"

"Yeah, come on. I'll go get one of my brother's old brooms out of the shed."

As they stood and started racing across the room, Molly called out, "Be carefully you don't go too high!"

"Yes, Mum!"

"Yes, Mrs Weasley!" Harry grabbed his broom by the doorway as he left the house.

They were out the door in a flash. Harry mounted his broom and took off. A minute later, Ginny joined him in the air. Since he was lazily flying around waiting for her, it was easy for Ginny to catch up.

"Since there's only two of us, you want to play follow-the-leader?" Ginny suggested.

"Sure, who's the leader first?"

With a grin, Ginny shouted “Me!” and took off. Harry took off after her. Ten minutes later they slowed down again.

“Not bad, Ginny...”

“Not bad! What do you mean not bad?”

“I mean it wasn't that hard to keep up with you,” he said with some smugness.

“What kind of broom do you have, anyway?” She looked at his. “Is that a Comet 260?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, maybe that's why,” she said a bit dejected. “I've only got a Comet 100.”

“So, we weren't flying straight lines. Besides, I'll switch with you and be the leader and I bet you can't keep up with me,” he challenged her.

She grew wide-eyed. “You'd switch?” He nodded. “Deal!” She quickly descended and he followed her.

They swapped brooms and Harry yelled over his shoulder, “Catch me if you can!” before he took off; Ginny was right behind him.

No matter how Harry turned and twisted, Ginny stayed up with him. It was frustrating for him. As he zipped around a tree and headed for the open paddock area, he decided to try something he had seen Cedric do. The problem was he had never tried it before. Oh well, showing Ginny he was better seemed like a good reason to do it.

As he got into the open area and Ginny started to catch up with his faster broom, Harry pulled up until he was hanging upside down on his back and heading back the other way, heading right for Ginny but about six feet above her. She screamed and went straight for a moment, until she remembered to do a normal left “U” to follow back after him.

Harry laughed and did a half barrel roll to be sitting upright again. He also slowed way down to let her catch up. When she did, he taunted her, "When you play follow-the-leader, you have to do what the leader does, Ginny. So I win."

"But, but, I've never done that before," she protested.

"So, I haven't either. I've just seen Cedric do it. He showed it to me when I got my training broom at Christmas."

She looked surprised. "You mean you really just started flying this last Christmas?"

"Yeah."

"Wow, you do learn fast; you're good."

"Thanks. So are you; you kept up with me until I did the fancy trick." She blushed slightly, but Harry could not figure out why.

They flew around a little more until her mother came out. "Ginny? Harry? Come down now, please"

Harry immediately flew to the ground near her mother, but Ginny continued to circle. "But Mum!"

"Ginny?! Come down right now, or you won't be flying for a week!"

"Yes, Mum!" She turned to head back, but she did not see the chimney as she did the sharp turn. Her broom hit the brick structure and she screamed as she fell off her broom and onto the roof. Unfortunately for her, it was the part that was the steepest and she rolled down the roof of the attic four stories up, then she fell off the edge.

"Ginny!" her mother cried and frantically dug in her apron for her wand, but her hand could not seem to even find the right pocket as her eyes were glued to her falling daughter.

“Ginny,” Harry softly said and held out his arms, just his father did for him. As Ginny was halfway down and Molly's hand had finally found the right pocket that her wand was normally in, Ginny's fall slowed down to a gentle descent and she came floating the few feet over to Harry, since he had been almost under her to begin with. The lost broom fell to the side several seconds before Ginny softly fell into Harry's arms, just like his father used to cradle him. Since she was as big as he was, her weight caused him to fall over with him on the bottom. “Ooph!”

Molly had not been able to get her wand out, but she had stopped trying when she saw Ginny's fall slow. With amazement, she watched her daughter gently fall into the boy's arms before they both fell. She quickly knelt down. “Ginny? Are you hurt?”

Ginny was a bit slow in getting up to her hands and knees, finally pulling back until she was kneeling on her knees. “I, I'm fine, Mum,” she said as she pulled her hair back over her shoulders.

Molly shook her head at the close call. Looking over she saw the boy lying on the ground looking up at her. “Harry, dear, are you all right? Do you hurt anywhere?”

He shook his head. “Not too much, just my bum; I think I landed on it first.” Ginny giggled.

Shaking her head, she helped both of them up. Each child grabbed a broom and they went inside.

“Ginny? Why don't you get one of your books and you and Harry can read together for the rest of the afternoon?”

“OK, Mum!”

When her daughter raced up the stairs, she turned back to the boy. “Harry, are you sure you're not hurt anywhere?”

“No, ma'am. I'm fine now, even my bum doesn't hurt any more.”

A minute later, Ginny was back down and had a book about dragons that her brother had sent her. Molly noticed that Harry could not read as well as Ginny, but he did not do too badly. There were a number of things very puzzling about Harry Diggory.

As she was about to leave to go do some laundry, she suddenly realized that Ginny was watching Harry very closely now, much closer than before. She smiled to herself as she thought about telling Arthur about a case of hero-worship. Then she thought about Ginny's fall again and shuddered. She had not been able to get her wand out in time, but the boy had saved her little girl. That was the best case of accidental magic that she had ever witnessed, and she was exceedingly grateful for it.

That evening, Molly was ready to serve dinner and Arthur was not home yet. She was starting to get worried, so she did what she did best in these situations: she glanced at her family clock to see that Arthur's hand was pointing to work. She then walked over to the doorway to check on her kids to see them looking at a book and laughing, then she went back to the kitchen and worked on dinner. Of course, there were only so many times she could stir the stew for tonight. She had picked that because it was easy to keep warm when she was not sure when dinner needed to be ready.

She glanced at the clock again, to repeat the cycle, and saw her husband's hand was on traveling. With a smile, she wiped her hands on her apron to make sure they were dry and listened. A short moment later she heard the whoosh of the Floo and rushed to the living room.

"Oh, ho! What have we here? We seem to have sprouted an extra boy. Who might you be?" her husband asked. She stood in the doorway to see what happened.

"Hi, I'm Harry Diggory." He sounded only a little shy.

"You are? Why, I didn't know Amos had another and you're so big for a newborn baby," he said with an easy grin.

His joking was contagious and put everyone at ease because Harry started laughing and Ginny giggled. "No, I'm not a baby, I'm eleven," he practically boasted.

Her husband looked up and saw her and gave her the special smile that made her heart melt. Her heart wanted to melt in a different way when she saw that his clothes were torn slightly and very dirty, which caused her to wonder what his day had been like. He otherwise looked very normal ... and safe! "What happened, dear?"

He walked over and put an arm around her waist while he gave her a quick kiss. "It's good to see you, Molly."

She heard a soft "Blech!" and looked over to see her daughter making a face. Harry was not making a face, but then he was looking at them like he had no idea why they would do that. She smiled to herself and hoped they stayed that way for a while. "What happened?" she repeated.

"Oh, it seems the Department of Mysteries did something a little too mysterious and caused a couple of levels above them to collapse."

"No!" she gasped.

"It wasn't as bad as it sounds, as it was only a small area not the whole floor, but the problem came from the fact that it was below a courtroom that was in use and the area above that was in use as well, so I helped rescue some of the trapped people," he explained.

Molly changed to a whisper because of the children. "Was anyone...?" She could not complete the sentence with the little ears present.

"Not that I'm aware of," he told her as he shook his head, aware of the real question, "there were just a lot of injuries." She saw him look down at the children and she suddenly realized why he was. "Harry, your dad is just fine. He wasn't hurt at all." The boys face became a lot happier. "Well, Mr Diggory, what brings you here today?"

"My mum had to go to the hospital to help."

"Right. That was helpful of her," the man nodded his approval. "What did you kids do today?"

"We went flying!" Harry excitedly told him. Ginny was smiling very big as well, and Molly saw her glance at Harry with a slight blush.

"Were you, now? Well, you'll fit in here just like a regular Weasley," he said with some pride.

"Harry did something very special today, Arthur," Molly softly told him. They were still standing close to one another after their kiss of greeting.

"Oh, what did you do today that was so special, Harry?"

"Besides flying?" Arthur nodded. "I caught Ginny," he said excitedly while Ginny blushed enough that her face almost matched her hair.

Arthur looked very surprised. "How did you catch Ginny? Were you chasing her?"

"I was earlier, but she also hit the chimney when she was flying and then fell off the roof. So I just held out my arms like my father does for me and caught her."

Molly saw her husband go wide-eyed and look at her for confirmation, so she slowly nodded. "I tried to get my wand out of my apron, but I couldn't do it fast enough. Harry produced the most amazing example of accidental magic I've ever seen by slowing her down and then floating her into his arms."

Her husband let go of her waist and leaned down in front of Harry. He put out his hand and Harry slowly put his out too. As Arthur shook the boy's hand, he told him, "Thank you very much, Mr Diggory. Our daughter is very precious to us, and you can save her any time you like."

Harry smiled at him and Molly noticed that Ginny again blushed deeply. It was very amusing to her that perhaps this real boy had finally displaced her crush on the storybook Boy-Who-Lived.

Their Floo roared to life and the green flames belched out a man.

“Amos!” Arthur greeted the man enthusiastically as he stood back up. Diggory had dirty robes as well, although his were not torn.

“Arthur, Molly, it's good to see you too. Harry, come here my boy.” He held his arms open and Harry scrambled up and ran to him for a hug. “And who have you been spending the day with Harry?”

Harry blushed slightly and said, “Ginny, this is Ginny.”

“Hello, Ginny, how are you?” She did not say anything, as though she went shy by blushing slightly and smiling back at him.

“Did you have a good day here, Harry?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Excellent!” Amos looked up at the other parents. “We've been thinking about trying to get him together to play with other children soon, so I suppose this worked out well after all. I do hope he behaved well for you, Molly.”

Molly smiled grandly and gave a short chuckle. “Why yes, Amos. In fact, Harry was quite the hero today. Harry, tell your father what you did just before you came in the house after flying.”

“I caught Ginny!” he proudly proclaimed.

“That's good son. Is she a good flyer?”

“Yes, Dad, but I also caught her when she fell out of the sky!”

“You what?!” His smiling look changed to one of questioning and amazement.

"Ginny turned too quickly when she came to land and hit the chimney. Then she bounced on the roof at the very top and fell off. I didn't want to see her hurt, so I caught her just like when you throw me in the air and catch me," Harry told him as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Merlin's Beard! That's phenomenal! How did you do that Harry?"

"It was easy, Dad. I just held out my arms and made her come into them. I don't think I did it right though because I fell over when she came to me. You never fall over when you catch me."

Amos laughed, as did the other adults. "Well, son, that's probably because I'm a lot bigger than you are, but you are only a little bigger than Ginny. When you get bigger, I'm sure you'll be able to catch her without falling over one day." He ruffled his son's hair.

Molly saw their visitor suddenly get serious. "Arthur, Molly, I need to ask a rather large favor from you."

"Certainly, Amos. What can we do for you?" Arthur asked in a curious voice.

"I need you to not tell anyone that we have Harry, at least not until he goes to school. As we've told Harry, he had an accident when he was younger. By staying with us, we've given him a home where he can be safe. We'd like to keep him safe for as long as possible."

"Of course, Amos. We'll help in any way we can," Arthur told him.

Amos looked down at the little girl. "Ginny, can you keep Harry a secret too? It would really help Harry." She nodded vigorously. "Thank you, Ginny. Well, if you'll excuse us, we should be going home. Molly? Thank you so very much for helping us out on such short notice."

"You're quite welcome, Amos." She turned to her daughter. "Ginny? Would you like Harry to come back and play again?" Ginny smiled very big and nodded, still being shy for some reason. "Amos, tell Dee

she's welcome to come visit and bring Harry over anytime we're here; and if she needs me to watch him someday, just let me know."

"Thank you, Molly. That's very kind of you. Well, Harry?" he lightly slapped his hand on his son's shoulder and squeezed. "Let's go home and surprise your mother with dinner. Tell your friend good-bye and Mrs Weasley thank you for having you over."

Harry turned to his minder for the afternoon. "Thank you for having me over and for lunch, Mrs Weasley. It was very good." He then turned to his new friend. "Bye, Ginny. I had fun with you today."

It a fit of boldness, Ginny stepped over to Harry and threw her arms around his shoulders for a second and squeezed before she stepped back. "Thank you for coming, Harry, and thank you for catching me." She again blushed a bright red. The adults all found it cute that Harry blushed too.

"Let's go, son." Amos led his son over to the fireplace, where Harry grabbed his broom that was leaning against the wall, and they were home a few seconds later.

When they arrived, Amos asked his son, "Harry, did you really enjoy playing with Ginny today?"

"Yeah, she was fun, even if she was a girl."

Amos smiled and had to work very hard to keep his laughter silent. He figured that in about three or four years, Harry would change "even if" to "because."

(A/N: There's the beginning and a little over one third of the entire story. Chapter 2 will come out in about a week. -- kb)

Chapter 2

((A/N: Here's the next 3 parts. Time for school to start. This should help everyone understand a little more. :-)) I want to thank everyone for their reviews I received. Again, thanks to moshpit, Sovran, and wolfsscream for the their help! Enjoy -- kb.))

((Anno-Hogwarts)))

“Year 1”

Harry went over to the Weasleys for the afternoon a couple of times each week. Not only did he enjoy time with his new friend, but Molly told Dee that Ginny enjoyed it. She had been very lonely all year with her brothers off at school.

Just before June ended, Cedric came home. Harry thought that was the greatest since Cedric would fly with him and teach him flying tricks. Harry also loved it since Cedric said he was so good. He did not know if Cedric really meant it, but he sounded like he did.

The next time Harry went to visit Ginny he got a surprise. Cedric took him over, and when he came out of the Floo, the room was filled with redheads.

Cedric smiled at them. “Fred, George, what's up?”

“Cedric! Who's that?” one of the twins asked. It was obvious they were curious, since they were waiting in the room with their sister.

“Oh, this is my little brother, Harry. We adopted him not long ago. You're not supposed to tell anyone about him until school starts though. It's for his safety,” Cedric explained.

“Why's that?” the other twin asked.

“My parents want to give Harry the chance to get used to us and everything else. It's just the family rule,” he said with a shrug.

"Yeah, we understand. We have family rules that don't make sense too," the youngest male Weasley said.

Cedric laughed for a moment before a strange thought occurred to him, one he tried to ignore for a moment. "OK, I know these two. Harry, one of those is Fred and the other is George. If you can tell them apart, good on you." The twins laughed at that. "She must be your friend Ginny, but I don't know you," he pointed to the other one. "You just started, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I'm Ron. I'll be in second year next year," he said proudly.

"Everyone, meet Harry."

"Hi Harry!" all the Weasleys shouted, even Ginny before she giggled. Harry blushed slightly.

"Hey, you've got a broom," Ron pointed to the object in Harry's hand, the object that always came over with him. "Do you fly?"

"Better than you do, Ron," Ginny told her brother. "In fact, I bet he flies better than any of us except for Charlie."

"Uh-uh, no way," Ron argued. "Besides, how would you know, Ginny?"

She rolled her eyes at her brother and ignored his question. "Then go get a broom and Harry will show you, won't you Harry?" Ginny challenged him.

"OK then, come on." Ron accepted the challenge and jumped up to run outside to find the truth. Ginny and Harry quickly followed.

"Fred? George?" Cedric called. The twins stopped, they were about to follow the others. "Would you two look after him? I'll be back in a while."

"Sure Cedric, he'll be safer than Ron with Ginny watching after him," one quipped.

"Yeah, go on; we'll see you later," the other assured him.

"Thanks. I'll, ah, be back later." Grabbing some Floo powder from the bowl on the mantel, Cedric left Harry and hurried back home with new questions going through his mind.

It was a Saturday afternoon, so both of Cedric's parents were home.
"Mum? Dad?"

"In here, son," Amos called out jovially to his oldest.

Cedric went into the kitchen and found his parent sitting at the table with a cold drink. Thinking that sounded good, he grabbed a Butterbeer out of the cold cabinet.

"Something on your mind, Cedric? Did school go well this year?" his father asked.

"Yeah, Dad, school was fine. Uh, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, son..." his father waited patiently and his mother seemed to be having a relaxing day too.

"It's about Harry. He's -- I don't know how to put this, but he's not just some kid who lost his parents and needed a new home, is he?" Cedric wanted to know, and yet he was almost afraid of the truth.

"I'm not sure I understand what you're asking."

Cedric looked at his father. He could tell his father was not lying to him, but it seemed that his father was not telling him everything either. He was not sure why, but new questions had popped into his mind while he had been talking to the Weasley twins.

He ran his fingers through the left side of his hair as he thought and tried to reason it out. "I guess it's this safety thing for Harry that made me start to wonder. Harry came into our family shortly after I started school. When I came home for Christmas, he was acting like a four- or five-year-old, even though he looked almost as old as he does now. And you wouldn't let anything happen to him, spent lots of time with

him, teaching him his alphabet and everything. Now when I come, he can read and write almost like a Firstie, he's an incredible flyer, and yet you still wrap him in extra layers of safety. Something's wrong beyond the story you told me, and I just want to know what it is."

Cedric watched his father take a deep breath and look at his mother. She got an expression on her face as if she was considering a hard problem before she slowly nodded.

"Son, we were going to tell you later this summer, but since you ask now, we'll tell you. You remember how we told you at Christmas time that Harry had an accident and lost his family, so we took him in to help him?"

"Yes, Dad."

"The more detailed version is that Harry's parents were killed when he was a baby. Since he had no Wizarding relatives, he was taken to live with Muggle relatives who did not treat him well. Against odds I can't begin to calculate, so I must say it was his magic, Harry managed to find his way to a place where a witch recognized he was a wizard and helped him. Part of the help was Harry had to be totally Obliviated so he could start over."

Cedric frowned as he tried to understand. "So you had to Obliviate his leaving and being found? That doesn't make sense."

"No, dear," his mother said. "Harry's previous life was so bad, that we had to remove all of his memories. Even though he was eleven, he was like a baby when we were done healing him."

His mouth literally dropped open in shock.

"Since it is in my line of work, and your father and I always wanted a second child, we volunteered to help raise him. I also took on the role of teacher this past year. As you've noticed, Harry is a very fast learner."

Cedric tried to make sense of all of it all, but this was so fantastic. Eventually, he asked, "Does Harry know all of this?"

"We've been slowly giving him pieces of it over the last few months," his mother explained. "Last week, I told him almost what we just told you. Cedric, we love you very much. We also have more love to give to others, people we care about, and that includes Harry as well. To us, he can be a Diggory if he wants to be."

There was something missing, Cedric thought. Harry lost his parents as a baby and then lived with Muggles. Harry turned up sometime last fall. What was missing? Suddenly he realized the question was really who was missing. Someone was missing at the Welcoming Feast, a Harry who was also eleven. "Harry Potter!"

"Very good, son," his father beamed at him. "However, you may not tell anyone yet. One day, it will come out. I don't know if it will be this fall or if Harry will try to keep the Diggory name for safety for a while. The choice will be up to him."

"I don't understand," Cedric was very curious. "Why is it such a big deal? You-Know-Who is dead."

His father made a strange look, which Cedric was not sure how to interpret. "Maybe he is, but if you talk to the right people, they'll tell you he's still alive -- just without a body at the present."

"What?!"

"Calm down, son. We don't really know. But what we do know is that some of His followers are still on the loose, so we need to protect Harry until he's finished at least a few years of school and has at least some chance of defending himself."

"Respectfully, Dad, are you daft? I've just finished my fourth year and I don't think I could defend myself against a Death Eater."

His father took no offense; in fact, he smiled. "I respect your opinion, son. However, starting next summer, Harry will be getting extra tutoring in Defense. Professor McGonagall has already told us it would happen. In fact, she told us she would arrange it when she

asked us to be extra safe with Harry when we took him in. In some ways, neither Harry nor us were given a choice.”

“I see. So Harry is in hiding here?”

“Basically, yes. On the other hand, this is our chance to help not only the Boy-Who-Lived, who has already done a lot for the world, but our chance to love a wonderful little boy who wants a family, including a big brother.”

Trust Dad to appeal to his family instincts, he thought. Cedric knew they were a close family and prided themselves on it. Mum may have been a Ravenclaw at school, but they were a Hufflepuff family. “Of course, Dad. Harry seems like a wonderful little brother.”

“We're glad you think so,” his mother told him with a smile. “It will be time to go pick up Harry in about an hour. Why don't you go unpack your trunk from school, as well as bring your dirty laundry to the cleaning room so I can take care of it this evening, then go pick him up. There's no rush, so if he needs a few minutes to finish something, it's all right.”

He nodded and got up to do his mother's bidding. As he did, he thought about his new little brother, the famous Boy-Who-Lived. But from what little he knew about him so far, Cedric suspected Harry did not care. He would have to get to know him better over the summer. Cedric suspected he would also have to help protect him at school when the truth came out. Fortunately, nine of the worst bullies had been expelled this year at Hogwarts. The others had gone underground. They were still mean and bad to be around, but they created trouble less frequently. Harry would need protection. Cedric hoped his brother was in Hufflepuff; that would make it a lot easier to do. If not, he knew some good people in the other two houses who would help him. There was no way Harry would be in Slytherin.

Once he was done with his chores, he went back over to the Weasley house and found Harry and Ginny lying side-by-side on the living room floor reading a book. When they looked up, he noticed the book was for first year Transfiguration. “Whatcha reading, Harry?”

"This is Ron's book from last year. Ginny and I wanted to see what it was about."

"I understand. Why didn't you just ask Ron?" he asked with curiosity, wondering what they were up to.

"He didn't care and didn't want to talk to us about it," Ginny told him with some irritation in her voice. "He said he's out of school for the summer and doesn't want to think about it until next September."

"Oh, I see. Do you understand what you're reading?" Cedric was curious about how smart they were, especially Harry.

"It mostly makes sense, but I don't understand how the third law of Transfiguration fits in. It seems to contradict the second law," Harry said with the most serious look Cedric had ever seen on him. Ginny mirrored the look which the older boy found quite amusing, an emotion he kept to himself.

For the next ten minutes, Cedric explained the Laws of Transfiguration using as simple of words as he could. When he finished, he asked, "Do you understand now?" He expected a 'no'.

"Oh yes, that makes perfect sense now," his brother told him. "I really wish I had a wand. I'd like to try some magic." Ginny was nodding too.

Cedric laughed. "Well, little brother, I suspect Mum will take us to Diagon Alley to shop for school supplies in about a month, and you can get your wand then. However, you'll have to wait until you get to school to start learning magic." Harry looked depressed at that so he chuckled. "Chin up, Harry. Hogwarts is a wonderful place and you'll learn loads there. Now, come on, we need to be getting home."

Harry nodded and got up. Cedric saw him bend down and give Ginny a hand to help her up -- a real gentleman he thought. However, he was shocked to see the two give each other a quick hug before Harry started walking towards the fireplace. Of course, now that he thought about it, it was like a brother and sister would hug, but it was still amusing and cute -- very cute. With a smile on his face, Cedric took his little brother home.

On the 31st of July, Harry was jumping up and down for joy when his Hogwarts letter came. He was so excited he tried to drag his mother to the fireplace so he could get his wand right then.

She looked at him with all of his excitement, partially hating herself for what she was about to do, and asked him, "Didn't you want Ginny to go shopping with you?" Harry nodded to her. "I'm really sorry Harry, but if we're to go together, we'll have to wait until the Weasleys are ready too. I spoke to Ginny's mother earlier and we have almost two weeks until they had planned to go shopping." His exuberance immediately deflated.

Harry sighed and slowly left the room. His mother watched him get his broom and then go outside to fly; it was his favorite way to make himself happy again. Oh well, she thought, he'll be happy this evening. Ginny and her family were coming over for a birthday party. After Ginny's party, a week and a half later, Dee watched her youngest and Ginny give each other a quick hug before the girl left. She covered her mouth with her hand and quietly chuckled, it was so cute. Ginny had received her Hogwarts letter at the first of the month, and the two families had scheduled a trip to shop after the next payday, which was tomorrow.

The next morning, Harry all but dragged his mother out of bed and got them over to the Weasleys fifteen minutes early. With five Weasley children, Harry could have been fifteen minutes late and still had to wait. Harry did not care too much though, Ginny was ready and they excitedly talked about what they would buy. Cedric had gone straight to Diagon Alley when they had left for the Weasley residence; one of the advantages of being older.

When they finally got there, Harry was amazed at all the sights. Ginny had been there before, but she was enjoying being there and listening to Harry's amazement. His previous shopping trips had been to the local town and to the outskirts of London. Their first stop was Gringotts.

The Weasleys went to one teller and the Diggorys went to another teller. Harry presented his vault key, which his mother had given to him that morning. The goblin held the key for a moment and then

looked at Harry. "Did you want to go to your vault or did you just want to make a withdrawal?"

"What's in my vault?" Harry asked, wondering what else could be in a vault beside money.

The goblin turned and waved his hand over a box. A few seconds later, a sheet of parchment came out of it, which was handed to Harry.

He and his mother looked at it, especially the number that was at the bottom. "That's a lot of money, isn't it Mum?" Harry did not see anything listed other than money.

Dee was beyond surprised. "Yes, Harry, 310,000 Galleons is a lot of money." She almost told him 'If you're careful, you probably would not ever have to work', but she decided that was best left unsaid so as not to demotivate him from working hard in school. "You'll need to be careful not to spend it all too quickly though. It can go a lot faster than you realize. We can talk about this with your father when we get home."

"OK, Harry told her, acting as if he matter was of no importance. "How much do you think I should get now?"

"We might need as much a hundred Galleons today. You should get a little more for spending money, too." She was curious as to what he would ask for. She would not stop him unless it was outrageous. She could have paid for all of his supplies, but Harry had wanted to do it himself when he had found out he had a vault from his birth parents. Professor McGonagall had told Dee there was enough in there for his school years, which seemed like an exaggeration now that she knew the amount.

Harry thought for a moment. With a nod as he came to a decision, he turned to the goblin and said, "I'd like to withdraw two hundred Galleons. Better safe than sorry," he told them both. His mother smiled at the phrase they frequently used on him. The goblin handed Harry his key and a small bag, which was obviously bigger on the inside than the outside based on its size. They turned to leave and found the Weasley's waiting for them.

"Molly? Why don't you go ahead to Madam Malkin's and get started there. We'll go to Ollivander's and then come find you. I have a feeling it might take Harry longer than normal to find his wand and I wouldn't want to make all your children wait on him." Dee got agreement from Molly and the two families split for awhile. Dee wanted to be alone with the wandmaker, anticipating what would probably happen.

Walking into the shop, she was pleased they were the only customers at the moment.

"Welcome," an old man said when he suddenly appeared from what seemed like nowhere. "Who do have we here? Delores Diggory, a ten and a half inch willow and unicorn hair wand, as I recall." He looked at Harry. "I was unaware you had any more children after Cedric."

"This is Harry Diggory. You will please call him that, even if you might know him by another name," she told him in a voice that did not allow for argument.

The old man reached out towards Harry and Harry shook his hand. The old man also stared at him a moment before he smiled. With the briefest of glances at her, he intoned, "Ah, Mr Diggory, it's so nice to finally meet you. I expected to see you last year."

"There was a slight problem then; it has been corrected." Again, she made sure her tone implied that was the end of the discussion.

Ollivander nodded. "Still, it is good you came to see me. The wand chooses the wizard and without one's proper wand, one's magic will never be as good. Now, let's start trying some out."

What must have been three-quarters of an hour later and who knew how many wands, some of which had made a terrible mess by unloading an entire shelf of wands, Harry finally swished one and a large number of maroon sparks and a gentle breeze came out and whipped around him. Dee was glad this was done.

“Very interesting, yes, very interesting. The brother wand to yours, Mr Diggory, gave you your scar. Nice glamour, by the way. That will be seven Galleons.”

Harry looked at his mother in surprise.

“Yes, Harry,” his mother nodded slightly. “it was an accident with magic. I'll tell you more when we get home.”

He nodded his acceptance, knowing his parents had never lied or held anything back from him when he asked directly. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his money bag and gave seven golden coins to the old man. They left him and a large mess in his shop to go find the Weasleys.

Due to the fact that Molly had five children to buy robes for, from Ginny up through Percy, and she was looking for 'good' second-hand robes, they were still dealing with robes when the Diggorys arrived. One of the shop girls came over and helped Harry. By the time he was done with new robes, Molly had finished selecting all of the Weasley's robes too.

While they were waiting on Mrs Weasley to pay for the robes, Harry pulled out his holly and Phoenix feather wand and showed it to Ginny. She thought it was very cool, and then she got a sad look on her face.

“What's wrong, Ginny?”

“I don't get to go get a new one; Mum said I have to use Grandmum's,” she said slowly.

“What? That won't do. Mr Ollivander says you have to have your own wand. Come on,” he told her with fierce determination. Grabbing her hand, he quickly led her out of the store while the two mothers were talking with each other and not paying complete attention to their children. Ginny had to almost run to keep up with him he was walking so fast. He guided her down the street and into the wandmaker's shop.

This time, the old man was at the counter, and to Harry's surprise, the mess that was there when he had left a little bit ago was all gone. The store was as neat as a pin.

"Ah, Miss Weasley, right on time. Let's see what we can find for you today."

She was on her fourth wand, one with as disastrous results as what Harry had had when she cleared almost an entire shelf with an overly strong wind, when two upset women and three other children came into the shop. Apparently, Percy had other things to do as he was not with them any longer.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley! What are you doing in here? You should not have left us like that!" said a red faced and red haired mother.

Harry saw that his mother had a very upset look, but she did not get to tell him what she thought.

"Ah, good morning, Molly," Ollivander jumped in before more could be said. "Eleven and half inch birch and dragon-heartstring. Don't worry, Miss Weasley was right on time. I've been expecting her. Here Miss Weasley, try this one."

Since her mother was momentarily speechless, Ginny took it and a wave produced a multitude of golden sparks.

"Excellent, Miss Weasley. Holly and dragon-heartstring -- a wand made for power; you will do well with it..."

Molly finally got her voice back as she interrupted. "I'm sorry to put you through all that work, Mr Ollivander, but Ginny will be using her grandmother's wand."

"But she can't," Harry objected.

"Harry! It is not your place to be saying what happens with Ginny," his mother admonished him forcefully.

"But Mum, you heard him. The wand chooses the wizard..."

“Harry!”

“...and if she doesn't have a good wand, she won't do well in school; and I want my best friend to do well in school with me.” Everyone stared at him. Since no one did anything for a moment, he quickly pulled out his money pouch and retrieved seven Galleons from it and gave it to the wandmaker.

“Mr Diggory, this wand is only five.” He handed two of the coins back. Harry nodded and returned them to his pouch.

“Harry...” Mrs Weasley came over and knelt down so she could talk to him face to face. “I'm glad you want to make Ginny happy, but we can't do this. We can't accept this from you.”

“You took my birthday gift to her; this is just another birthday gift,” he argued.

“But you did not spend this much on her birthday gift, and you've already given her one, so you don't need to give her another.”

Not knowing to back down, he determinedly went on. “But you don't know that I didn't spend that much on her, and besides, you gave her three gifts.”

She gave him a wry smile. “That's true, but we're also her parents, and as her parent, I say she will have to use her grandmother's wand.”

Harry looked at her fiercely for a moment, trying to determine what to do. Finally, he said, “I don't understand why you want her to fail school, because she will without the new wand.”

“No she won't, Harry. Ginny is a very smart girl and she'll do just fine.”

He continued to try to find a way out of this. A sudden smile came to his face. “Do you have the other wand with you?”

"Yes, I do. I was going to have Mr Ollivander take a look at it to make sure it was in proper working order." She rummaged around in her purse and pulled out the old and slightly beat-up looking wand to hand to the wandmaker.

"Ah, Ethel Prewitt's wand, vine and Cockatrice feather -- very definitely wrong for Miss Weasley." He waved it a moment producing only a few yellow sparks before he handed it to Ginny. "It is in proper working order. I believe Mr Diggory would like you to give it a wave." Harry nodded vigorously.

Ginny waved the wand and a single white spark came out, and almost as an afterthought at that.

"See the difference!" Harry proclaimed. "This wand makes her look like a squib compared to the new wand." He looked at Ginny and, for the first time since her mother had come into the store, a look of hope came to her face.

Mrs Weasley slowly nodded her head and Ginny threw her arms around Harry's shoulders for a quick hug. "Thanks, Harry!" She turned around and accepted her new wand from the wandmaker. "Thanks, Mr Ollivander!" Harry started to walk out of the shop so she went with him.

Harry noticed her brothers for the first time since they had come in, they had been so quiet. The twins were grinning at them, but Ron was scowling. Harry did not care. Other than flying, Ron did not spend much time with them. Once, Ron had even said, "Yeah, but you're a year younger than I am." Harry did not know why that should make a difference in being a friend, but he did not dwell on it either.

When his mother caught up to him outside of the wand shop, she gave him a look that Harry could easily interpret that they would be having a long talk when they got home. "This way, Harry. We need Potion supplies and then books."

Obtaining the Potion supplies was non-eventful, but the books were another matter. It seemed like the entire Wizarding World was there.

It appeared that the author of all of his Defense books was there for a signing.

As they were finally about to leave, a very blond headed boy ran into Ginny almost knocking her down. "Hey, watch where you're going!"

"You watch where you're going!" Harry almost shouted back. "You're the one not paying attention to where you're walking." A scuffle started with the boys pushing one another. It almost came to blows before a hand grabbed the blond boy and pulled him back.

"Draco," the voice drawled. "What have I told you about being around commoners?"

Although the boy was looking down as if he felt guilty, Harry could see the expression on his face showed he had enjoyed it. "Sorry, Father."

"We shall be going, then." The father, also a blond but with longer hair, looked to Mrs Weasley. "Since some people can not seem control their children." They left before Mrs Weasley could say anything, although she looked like she wanted to give the man an earful.

Fortunately for Harry, his mother had been paying for his books at the time and did not see the short scuffle. Therefore, she did not immediately take him home. Instead, when they left the bookstore, she told Harry, "We have one more thing to buy, and I think you'll find this very useful." She led him to a shop a few doors down called "The Owl Emporium".

"Go ahead, Harry. Pick out an owl. You can use it to write to us, or anyone else that you need to."

Harry's face broke out into a large smile. "You mean I can have my own owl just like Cedric does?"

"Yes, Harry," she told him with a slight chuckle, "just like Cedric."

Harry started looking around with Ginny helping him out. Her brothers were just looking at the owls, pointing, and laughing from time to time. Her mother had found a chair by the door, as if guarding it, and sat down to rest. His mother was sitting next to Mrs Weasley and they seemed to be having an intense but very quiet conversation.

Eventually, Ginny pointed to a very white owl. "He looks very smart." The owl under inspection glared at her with its golden eyes and hooted very loudly.

Harry laughed. "I think the owl is trying to tell you she's a she." The owl hooted much more softly, almost a coo.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "How was I supposed to know? I just thought she was pretty and looked intelligent." The owl seemed to coo again.

With a smile, Harry grabbed the cage and took her up to the front. "I'd like to buy ... Hedwig." The owl softly hooted again and Ginny giggled.

The shopkeeper looked at the boy carefully. "Well, maybe it'll be all right. She's been ornery with everyone else who's tried to buy her." Hedwig twisted her head almost completely backward and clicked her beak at the man. "See!" he told Harry.

When the owl turned back around and cooed at Harry, he put a finger in and petted the soft feathers on the top of her head. "I think she'll be wonderful." The man just shook his head as he rang up the purchase.

His mother bought some owl treats too and they finally went home. A long day of shopping completed, and it was only lunch time. Harry could not wait to get home and show his brother his new wand and books. Maybe Cedric could explain a few more things to him.

The next evening, about an hour before dinner time, Ginny surprised Harry by coming out of his fireplace. "Hi, Harry!"

"Ginny! What are you doing over here?"

She looked down for a minute before she looked up at him, as if she was afraid of something. "My mum said I had to come over here for a week to help your mum with some things."

“Huh?”

“She wasn't very happy with the wand, Harry. She and your mother worked this out. I'm supposed to come over and help your mother around the house to repay her.”

He was even more confused now. “But I paid for it...”

“I know, we all saw you, but she said since your mum gave you the money, I had to work for her.” Ginny did not seem upset or anything, mostly resigned.

“No, you don't understand. I have my own vault; that was my money; it was my decision not my mum's.” He sighed and she gave him a puzzled look. “My mum was not happy with me either, especially about me arguing with your mum, but she understood. Don't worry though, I'm sure she won't work you hard.”

“What do you mean you have a vault? I think only my oldest brother Bill has a vault, although maybe Charlie does too since he doesn't live at home either.”

“It was from my real parents, not my mum and dad Diggory,” Harry said very matter-of-factly. “Mum said I had to be careful not to spend it all, but I don't know what she's worried about. If I spend only a hundred Galleons a year, it'll take foreeeever to empty.”

Ginny laughed. “Harry! You don't spend a hundred Galleons a year when you grow up. You have to buy a house, take care of a wife and children,” she blushed slightly but didn't stop, “and loads of other things too.”

“Oh,” Harry thought about that for a moment. “Well, but I'll have a job like Dad and make lots of money that way, so it'll still take forever to spend it all.”

“I don't know, Harry. I think it goes faster than it comes in, at least that's what my parents always say.”

Harry nodded a little. "Yeah, my mum told me the same thing too. Well, let's go tell Mum you're here."

Harry's mother had Ginny set the table and then carry a few dishes in. Harry's father came home about that time and the four of them soon ate; Cedric was at a friend's house for the evening. After dinner, his mother had Ginny take her dishes to the sink and then she was sent to play with Harry.

"That was easy," Ginny told him.

Harry smiled. "See, I told you it would be. Come on, I want to show you something." He led her to his bedroom and closed his door.

Ginny looked around. "It's nice." There were enough things it was obvious it was a boy's room, but it was not cluttered either. It was also quite clean, like her room.

"Thanks. I want to show you something. I learned this last night." He walked over to his dresser and picked up his new wand. With a look of concentration, he said, "Lumos" and the end of his wand lit up.

Her eyes grew big. "That is so cool! But aren't you afraid of getting in trouble? I don't think we're supposed to do magic outside of school."

"We're not?" Harry was surprised. Ginny shook her head. "Nox." The light went out. "That's too bad, because it was fun to learn that, and I'll never stub my toe in the dark again."

"You didn't receive a warning from the Ministry?" she was amazed when he shook his head. "You're lucky."

"Harry! Ginny!" his mother's voice came through the door.

The two went back out into the living room. "Ginny? Would you please hand me that towel that's on the floor over there? One of the boys must have dropped it there."

By the look on her face, Ginny thought that strange, but she did it.

“Thank you, Ginny. Now, when you go home and your mother asks you. You helped me fix dinner, set the table, cleaned up afterwards, and you helped me pick up the living room.”

Ginny giggled as Mrs Diggory smiled at her. “Thank you, thank you very much.”

“You're welcome, Ginny. Harry? Why don't you go get one of your books and the two of you can read together out here for a short time before Ginny has to go home.”

Harry retrieved his first year Transfiguration book so they could read more beyond where they had before.

When Ginny had to leave, she gave Harry a hug as she usually did, although this time she also whispered to him. “Thanks, Harry. You have a great mum.” A moment later she was gone. When he turned around, he found his mother looking at him and smiling as if she knew something special. Shrugging, he went back to his room to get his Defense books. He wanted to make notes of what was in there. He figured if he treated it like History, noting the defense equivalent of names/dates/places, it could be very interesting.

The next evening, Ginny returned, but this time she had a little black book in her hand.

“What's that?” Harry wanted to know.

“I'll show you after dinner,” she told him and slipped it into a pocket.

After dinner, which went much like the previous evening, except that tonight Harry's mother had Ginny empty the waste bin in the bathroom so she could say she cleaned the bathroom, the two of them sat down in front of the fireplace. It was warm, so the fire was very small and only there so that the Floo connection would work.

Ginny also pulled out a quill and a small bottle of ink, which she opened. “Watch this,” she whispered before she wrote, “Hi again” in the book, which soaked into the page and disappeared after a few seconds.

"Hello. Is that you again, Ginny?"

Harry almost yelled in his surprise, but managed to contain himself. "How did the book do that?" he whispered.

"I don't know, but Dad says every magical thing has a brain." She wrote, "Yes, it's me and I have a friend too. His name is Harry."

The book sat there for a moment before it wrote back, "Hi Harry. I'm Tom. Are you a friend of Ginny's?"

"Who's Tom?" he asked her.

"I don't know. That's the name of the book, I guess. See?" She flipped the book over and he saw "T.M. Riddle" on the front of the book.

"Where did you get it?"

"It was in my book bag when I came home. I didn't pick it up from the store, so I guess my mum put it in." She shrugged.

Harry took the quill to write. "Yes, she's my best friend."

What he wrote also soaked into the page. "Ginny? Is he your best friend too?" the book wrote back a few seconds later.

Ginny grabbed the book to turn it back to her, but Harry had not let go of the page. To their amazement, the page that should have torn when yanked did not. "Weird," she said before she carefully reached out with both hands and tried to tear the page slightly. Again, it did not tear.

Harry reached forward and tried; it did not tear for him either. On a whim, Harry picked up the little book and tossed it into the fireplace. That set Ginny off.

"Harry! You can't burn my book like that!" She shouted, mad at him now.

He heard the newspaper fall behind him, so he knew his father was paying attention to them; but he also noticed something else. "Ginny, look! The book -- it's not burning!" Sure enough the book sat in the middle of the fire but was not being consumed by it.

Harry heard footsteps behind him before he saw his dad pick up the poker and pull the book out of the fire. Gingerly, he touched the cover. "It's not even warm," he muttered. He looked at it a moment before he set it to the side. Giving them a serious look, he said, "Neither of you touch that; sorry Ginny." She nodded, her amazement evident on her face.

Standing up, he got a pinch of Floo powder and threw it in. Kneeling back down he announced, "Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office," before he put his head into the fire. A minute or so later, he pulled his head back out. "Everyone, stand back," he told the kids.

Harry noticed his mother had come in the room and was looking at them as the fireplace glowed green and a tall witch stepped out. She looked around and greeted everyone. "Amos. Dee." She looked at him and smiled. "Harry, hello again." He had seen her for a few minutes during a few visits since Christmas, although he had never talked with her. Turning to the last person, she nodded, "Ginevra."

"Ginny," she said with a trace of defiance.

The tall witch gave a small smile. "Ginny, I stand corrected. I'm Professor McGonagall, the Headmistress of Hogwarts. Now, I understand you have a very special book, Ginny. Where is it?" Ginny pointed to the book on the hearth. The Headmistress pulled out her wand and started doing a number of spells on it. When she finished, she pursed her lips and looked to be thinking very hard. "Excuse me for a moment." She grabbed some Floo powder and threw it in before she said, "Dumbledore's Domicile," and stepped in.

A couple of minutes later, the fireplace flashed twice. McGonagall was back, but she had brought a tall old wizard with a very long white beard.

"Dumbledore," his father greeted the man, but Harry noticed it was not enthusiastic like he did to most people. Harry wondered who he was and why his dad did not seem to like him very much.

"Amos. Dee. Harry. Ginevra." The man nodded to each as a brief greeting.

"Ginny," the young witch corrected him automatically.

"Ginny," he politely said. His eyes seemed to almost twinkle as if by magic. "Now, where is this mysterious book?" McGonagall pointed it out to him on the edge of the hearth and the old wizard started casting spells at it too, many more than the professor. He also scowled when he looked closely at the name on it. Dumbledore looked at the young witch. "Ginny? Where did you get this book?"

"It was in my book bag when I came home from the bookstore," she answered a little shyly.

"And you did not purchase it?"

"No. I assume my mother did and put it in."

"Your mother would not have; it is very Dark Magic." Everyone but Professor McGonagall gave him a surprised look; she just closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Did anything unusual happen while you were at the bookstore or before you came home."

"I don't think so," she said slowly as she gave it thought. Harry leaned over and whispered in her ear. She blushed slightly before she looked back up at the old wizard. "Harry reminded me that a boy a little older than us, maybe a student, pushed me and we almost got into a fight; but his father stopped him before anything bad happened, although he wasn't fast about doing so."

"Do you know who it was? Were any names mentioned?" Dumbledore asked with calm curiosity.

She was a bit hesitant, but she finally said, "His father called him Draco."

The professor and Dumbledore both seemed to groan slightly. "Perhaps the shoving was to distract everyone while Lucius placed the book in her bag?" the Professor asked her colleague.

Dumbledore nodded. "That would make sense. Arthur is trying to get some new Pro-Muggle legislation introduced, a law that Lucius would not like to see passed. Arthur's daughter doing something embarrassing might be enough to derail that. It's a pity when men use innocent children to do dirty deeds to advance a political agenda." He sighed and became thoughtful looking before he suddenly brightened. "I shall be right back." He used the Floo to leave.

"Professor?"

She turned to look at the young boy. "Yes, Harry."

"Is the book really that dangerous?"

"Yes, Harry. It is very dangerous. It was also a good thing that you brought this to our attention. Should you ever find anything else that seems magical and you aren't sure about it, please bring it to the attention of your parents or me immediately. We'll help you with it and you'll never be in trouble. The same goes for you too, Ginny."

Harry looked at the woman and she seemed to be very sincere, so he nodded.

"Yes, Professor," Ginny answered her.

Albus Dumbledore returned in a flash of green light. He was holding a small stone bowl with many markings on it. He set it on the short table in the living room before he turned to Ginny. "This is a Pensieve. It allows us to look at memories. So I'd like you to think very carefully about the time from which you entered into the bookstore until you left it. Can you do that?" She nodded very solemnly. "Very good. When you do, I'll put a copy of your memory out and you'll feel something like a little tickle in your head, but it won't hurt you. Do that and then tell me when you're ready."

Ginny seemed to scrunch up her face in concentration before she said, "OK."

Harry watched the old wizard place his wand to her temple and when he pulled it back, a silvery blob of tangled threads seemed to be sticking to his wand. Dumbledore placed that in the stone basin.

Dumbledore looked at his parents. "This Pensieve can hold but four people at a time, so I'd like the children to come with Minerva and myself. If we find something, then we should probably bring Arthur and Molly over and the four of you can go in."

His parents agreed.

"Harry, Ginny, I want you each to stick your hand into the bowl. It will feel like you're being pulled in. Don't fight it. We will follow behind you. You can't do anything or hurt anything in there, nor can you be hurt, so don't be afraid. Go ahead."

Harry looked at Ginny. She looked a bit scared, but she took a deep breath and stuck her hand in anyway. He saw her go very still before he put his hand in too. Before he realized what had happened, he was in the bookstore, although everything seemed a bit pale. A few seconds later, Dumbledore and the Professor joined them.

"Everyone watch what's going on. The moment you see either Draco Malfoy or his father, keep a close eye on them; they are our primary suspects. If you see something you need to look closer at, yell 'pause' and I shall freeze the memory," Dumbledore instructed.

They all watched and just before Ginny was to bump into someone, she yelled, "There they are!" Everyone watched closely. When Draco knocked his shoulder into Ginny, and it did look purposeful, she dropped her bag and it went slightly behind and to the side of Draco. They watched the father and a few seconds after the Draco yelled at Harry, they saw the man pull a wand out of the top of his cane and shoot a spell at Ginny's bag so it opened up. He quickly dropped a little back book into the bag and then closed it up with another spell before putting his wand up and then grabbed Draco to stop the fight. The planting of the book had taken less than ten seconds.

"That's what we needed to know. Everyone hold on," Dumbledore told them. With a wave of his wand, the children found themselves floating up and then they were back in their normal bodies in the Diggory living room.

"Well?" Amos asked.

"I'm both afraid and delighted that our theory is true. Lucius put the book in Ginny's bag." Dumbledore looked at McGonagall. "If you will go fetch the Weasleys, I shall track down Amelia Bones." He then left with a faint crack. The professor left via the Floo.

Harry's mother came over to him and gave him a hug. "I'm glad you're all right, Harry. This is why I didn't like you running off that day. Who knows what can happen?"

"I'm sorry, Mum." In truth, he really was.

"It will work out, dear; we'll make it work out," she told her son.

"Are we going to tell Cedric when he gets home?"

"Yes dear, we'll tell Cedric when he comes home from his friend's house." She patted his back.

The Weasley parents were the first to arrive and they looked very concerned. They had barely started asking questions when Dumbledore, plus a woman and a tall dark man Apparated onto the front porch. Amos let them in.

"Harry, Ginny, this is Director Amelia Bones, the head of the Aurors; and this is Kingsley Shacklebolt, one of her senior Aurors. Amos, Dee, Arthur, and Molly, why don't you enter the memory. I will make it skip about the first ten minutes; watch Ginny very carefully. When Draco Malfoy bumps into Ginny, watch his father. When they go away, feel free to come back out." Dumbledore let the four parents enter and then he tapped the stone basin a few times and turned back to his other guests.

"We'll watch it next, but this is what he planted in Ginny's school bag." He pulled the book out of his robes. "It is very dark magic and I will have to research how to destroy it once it is no longer needed as evidence."

"What is it, Albus?" Bones asked.

"It's a Horcrux for Voldemort," he simply said. The Aurors gasped.

"Surely you're joking?"

"I wish I was," he solemnly told her.

The parents came out and Mrs Weasley looked very angry. "What did he put in her bag? It must be bad or you wouldn't have Director Bones here."

Dumbledore looked like he did not want to answer, but he finally told her, "It's a magical artifact designed to possess her and then bring Voldemort back to life." All the parents and Ginny gasped. Harry did not gasp only because he was too surprised.

Mrs Weasley moved over and pulled Ginny into a hug and continued to hold her close. "And Lucius did that practically right under my nose." She began to cry. Harry thought he heard her mutter something about a "bad mother", but he was not sure.

"I believe I need to see," Amelia said. She, Shackbolt and Dumbledore stuck their hand in and went still. Everyone just talked about how horrible it was while Mrs Weasley cried quietly. Harry grabbed a hold of Ginny's hand to try and comfort her and she looked thankful for his support.

A few minutes later, the three in the Pensieve returned to normal. Amelia Bones stood there for a moment looking very thoughtful; then she smiled as if she had had a sinister thought. "Minerva, the Board of Governors is about to get a lot easier for you to deal with and we're all about to get a Minister for Magic who is less controlled. I've never been able to prove it, but I know it's true that Lucius influences Cornelius."

"I'll just take this copy of the memory," she did that and put it into a phial that Shackbolt provided her. "Mr Diggory, if you'll give me your memory too, it's quite possible the same information is there for you too and that would be helpful." She helped Harry retrieve his memory and put it in the basin. Since he only contributed the time around the short scuffle, the Director reviewed and said Mr Malfoy was visible in it too, so she took a copy of that memory for evidence. The book went into a special box.

Director Bones turned to Ginny. "Miss Weasley, I'm very happy that nothing bad happened to you and I thank you for bringing this to our attention. The same goes to you, young Mr Diggory," she said as she faced Harry. "I don't know how to reward you for what you've done, but if I think of something, I'll do my best to make it happen. The only problem is that we can't let people know that it was you two who found this."

Harry could not help himself. "Do you think you could recommend some good Defense books? I've started looking at the ones we're supposed to use and they don't look very good. Lockhart seemed to be in two places at once sometimes."

McGonagall looked ashamed as she hung her head. "I'm very sorry, you two, but he was the only candidate for the job this year. I understand your concern, but I really could not find anyone else to teach it."

"And I'm unable to provide an Auror to teach as I did last year; I'm sorry" Bones apologized. Harry nodded. "But your request is easy and you should consider it done. Expect something in a couple of days from me." A few minutes later, the two Aurors were gone.

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "Sir, if the book was that dangerous, how come everyone could hold it and not get hurt?"

The old man smiled and his eyes seemed to twinkle again. "Holding it is not a problem. Writing in it is another matter entirely."

"But, we wrote in it..." Harry wondered if he should be scared.

“Did it only write back pleasantries?”

“Yeah, it just asked us who we were and a few things about us,” Ginny told him.

“Then you are very lucky it had not had time to place you under its spell. Do not worry about it all. Lucius Malfoy will go to Azkaban for this and then I shall destroy the book. I bid you all a pleasant evening, and if you find anything else like this, please bring it to my attention.” A few seconds later, he disappeared with a soft crack.

“I must add my congratulations as well, Miss Weasley and Mr Diggory. I look forward to seeing both of you in school in a few weeks. I'll let everyone know of any news I receive on this matter. Good evening.” She turned and left for her school office via the Floo.

Finally it was just the two families. “Well, this was not something I was expecting when we went shopping for school supplies,” Dee commented. That got a round of nervous laughs.

“I'll be checking our bags very carefully next time,” Molly told them. There were a lot of smiles for that comment too.

Ginny gave Harry a quick hug and the Weasleys left. Harry wondered what Cedric would think when he found out about all the excitement he had missed.

The day that both Harry and Ginny had both been eagerly waiting for finally arrived. Their families got together and went to King's Cross together. Harry was thrilled to see the Hogwarts Express. Cedric helped him with his trunk and into a compartment before he left. Ginny joined him there. Ron did not look too happy about that, but he did not stay around, muttering something about “Firsties” before he left to go sit with others from his year.

Harry wondered what school would be like, as his parents had told him that his real name was known in the Wizarding world. To help that, his mother had taught one bit of magic in the couple of weeks before he left for school: a glamour charm. It had been hard to learn as it was not normally learned until the third year, but he had

managed it. Harry had strict instructions to whisper the spell every morning before he got out of bed; his mother had also given him a mirror to keep in his bedside table to check it. He hoped no one found out who he really was because he did not want everyone pointing at him. So far, no one had.

Just before the train left the station, they were joined by some others who were to be first years. There was Colin Creevey, Amanda Devonshire, Julia Chesterfield, and Jack Sloper. Shortly after the lady with the snack cart came by, a girl named Luna Lovegood stopped in and joined them for the rest of the journey. Since Harry and Ginny were the only ones with older siblings already there, they led most of the discussion about the school. All in all, they had a great time on the train.

They got to experience the boat ride across the lake, and to their good fortune, the weather was pretty reasonable. Colin got wet even if it was not raining as he took a little too close a look at the lake. Fortunately for him, the giant squid helped him back into the boat. It was funny to see him alternate between terrified and thrilled.

Cedric watched the sorting begin. He thought back to his first year as he watched the first student, a Luke Butterfield. Like that boy, who went to Ravenclaw, Cedric had barely placed the hat on his head before it shouted "Hufflepuff". He remembered being a little scared, so he had done his best to tell Harry not to worry and that wherever he was sorted, Cedric was fine with it. Finally, the moment came.

Professor Flitwick shouted, "Diggory, Harry."

With a little trepidation, he watched his little brother put the hat on and then sit there. Harry looked like he was concentrating on something, but the hat did not say anything. He had seen the hat take awhile on a few people, but Harry seemed to have the record he thought. He also noticed that neither Flitwick nor McGonagall seemed to be concerned in the least.

After nearly half a minute, the hat finally shouted, "Gryffindor!"

While a little disappointed, he clapped loudly anyway. Harry went to sit beside the Weasley twins. Cedric hoped they and their pranking nature did not rub off on him too much. Still, they were pretty decent underneath. He would have a few words with them about watching out for Harry, especially if any of the larger Slytherins were nearby.

A few of his friends started asking him about his little brother that they did not know he had; he told them Harry was adopted but he was his little brother now. Harry seemed happy and that was the most important thing to Cedric.

Harry watched Colin, Amanda, and Jack come into Gryffindor too. Julia went into Hufflepuff, while Luna was sorted into Ravenclaw. He clapped very loudly when Ginny was sorted into Gryffindor as well. He had saved a seat for her, so when he motioned her over, she joined him.

The twins congratulated her as did Percy and Ron. Harry could not figure out Ron, but maybe they just did not know one another well enough yet to be friends. A bushy haired brunette also introduced herself.

"Hi, I'm Hermione Granger. You must be Ron's sister. He's talked about you." It was all said in one quick breath.

"Good things, I hope," Ginny quipped, but not too worried about the answer.

"Uh, mostly." She turned to Harry. "So, are you Cedric's little brother? He's the only Diggory I'm aware of."

He smiled at her and her quick tongue. "Yes, but I'm adopted."

"Oh? What happened?"

Harry wondered if she was always this curious. "My parents died when I was younger and the Diggorys were nice enough to raise me. They're really great, and Cedric is pretty cool, too." Someone got her attention from the other direction and she was gone, fully into that conversation. Harry smiled as he considered she talked about as fast as Colin did, and he had been amazed at the boy.

The rest of the feast went well. The Headmistress introduced some new staff. It seemed that Professor Slughorn was back as the Potions teacher. He did not know why everyone was clapping, but he did too.

Professor Lyle was introduced as the new History of Magic teacher, which generated even more applause. He heard comments from the other Gryffindors about not being able to sleep in class now that the ghost was gone. That sounded strange; he would have to ask one of the older students about it.

Someone named Horning was introduced as the new Caretaker, which also produced a lot of applause. "I'm glad she sacked Filch and his stupid cat," he heard Ron say. The redhead's twin brothers did not seem as happy as the rest, even if they did clap along with everyone else.

And finally, Gilderoy Lockhart was introduced as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Most of his applause came from the females in the room.

Harry did not care for Lockhart's books too much; there were inconsistencies between them, or so he had found when he was taking notes on them. Fortunately, Director Bones had sent a list of books to him to read about Defense. In addition, the actual books came with the list so he did not have to go buy them. He assumed that was the 'thank you' she had mentioned. Ginny had received a set as well, although hers were different. Both notes encouraged them to share with the other so they would have more to read. They both agreed that was a good idea.

As the feast ended, Cedric came over to him quickly. "Hey, little brother. Gryffindor is not as good as Hufflepuff, but it's a good second choice." He laughed when he said it and ruffled Harry's unruly hair.

"Ha, ha. Wait until we play you in Quidditch, then we'll see who's better and who's second." He made sure he was smiling so Cedric knew he was joking back, which apparently he did as Cedric laughed.

Then his older brother turned more serious as he walked with Harry so Harry would not get lost. "What happened with the Sorting Hat? It took a long time with you."

"We had an argument..."

"What? It talked to you?" Cedric was obviously surprised.

"Yeah. It said I could fit in almost any house and almost put me into Hufflepuff, but I told it that it had to put me in the same house as Ginny Weasley." Harry heard a giggle beside him and turned to look at Ginny.

"I told the hat it had to put me into Gryffindor, since that was the house you were in." She was smiling and blushing slightly.

Harry nodded. "That makes sense, we are best friends."

Cedric chuckled. "Well, there's the long stairs to your tower. If you need anything, ask a prefect or come ask me. Things are a lot better now than in past years, but if anyone tries to pick on you, you let me know."

"Thanks, Cedric. I'll see you later!" Harry waved good-bye.

"He's a good big brother," Ginny commented. "Sort of like how Bill and Charlie are, or how the twins can be, if they're serious enough."

"What about Ron?" Harry was curious about the boy. Harry already knew Percy ignored everyone but himself. Harry had seen the third brother maybe four times, each very briefly, over the entire summer.

"Ron can be a good brother too, when he puts his mind to it. But he has his own problems, most of them because he's the sixth and last boy. One day he'll grow up and be all right," she prophesied.

They came to the portrait covering their entrance into the Gryffindor Tower. They were told the password by a prefect and went in. Harry thought it looked really wonderful -- very cozy. The prefects were

herding the first years off to bed, so Harry and Ginny gave each other a quick hug and went up the proper stairs to their dorms.

Across the room, Ron was watching his little sister come in. He had been trying to figure her and her new friend out. They seemed really close. He had even asked his mother about them once. She had told them that they were good friends and had spent a lot of time playing together since May. His mother had gone on to say that she thought it was a good thing because Ginny had been so lonely at home by herself. Ron felt a little guilty about that as he knew he could have written her, but he had not. Still, she should not be best friends with a boy no one really knew. It was not done and he did not understand why his mother was not more concerned. Perhaps he should have asked her that, but he had not.

Then he saw them hug before they each went up the stairs. "Look at him. He's taking advantage of her." He started to get up to go over to Harry, but he was immediately pushed back into his seat. Looking up, he saw his twin brothers looking at him and shaking their heads.

"I was afraid of this," one said.

"I was too, but our agreement is normal," the other one commented.

"Ronnikins, you're going to have to stop reacting and start using your eyes..."

"And your brain because things are not always what you think."

"What are you talking about? Did you see what he just did to our sister?" Ron was still upset.

"Yes..."

"But the question is, did you?"

"He hugged her. He shouldn't be doing that!" Ron could not believe they did not agree.

"Perhaps he left his brain in his trunk?"

“Naw, I think he just forgot to turn it on.”

“Ron, describe what you saw...”

“Exactly, what you saw.”

“Harry Diggory grabbed Ginny and hugged her.” Ron thought it was obvious. Both twins shook their heads.

“Ronnikins...” One twin said, sad with great disappointment.

“Are you so blind you missed everything else?” The other twin was incredulous.

“First, they stood toe to toe, their bodies were not even close together...”

“Second, Ginny opened her arms and leaned over towards Harry...”

“That was important Ron, as is the fact that thirdly, Harry returned the gesture, not initiated it...”

“Fourthly, the entire hug lasted less than two seconds...”

“And fifthly, they hugged just like she and you hug...”

“So finally, there is nothing to be concerned about because even Mum has seen them do it and she's not concerned in the least so you should not be either.”

Ron stared at them for a moment. “You two are mad, you know that don't you?”

“That may well be, Ronnikins...”

“But that does not affect our sister and her friend.”

“A friend who quite possibly saved her life while we were at school.”

“What are you talking about?” Ron was confused now.

"Harry probably saved Ginny's life last May..."

"You should ask Mum about it. It's quite the story."

"You're just making it up," Ron was a little doubtful considering who he was talking to.

"Fraid not, little bro..."

"Write and ask her..."

"But leave Ginny alone if you know what's good for you..."

"Or don't, it would be so much more amusing for us. 'Night!"

The two left and Ron was puzzling over what had happened.

"They're right, you know," came a soft voice from the side.

Ron whipped around and found a classmate he could not decide if he liked or not. After a big fight last year, they had decided on a truce and been distant friends. "Do you always listen in on other people's conversations?" he asked a little peeved that she had heard all that.

"No, but when I'm sitting nearby in a public place and you're practically shouting, you're actually quite difficult to ignore."

He looked at her, an open book in her lap like normal. "Why do you think they're right?" He was still working through everything they had said. It was reasonable to ask her, she had demonstrated that she had a brain in all of their classes.

"Several reasons. First, your brothers have obviously talked to your mother about it and she's apparently all right with your sister and Harry. Second, it's obvious they're close friends by the way they sat together and talked. Third, they did not hold hands or anything, so they're not boyfriend and girlfriend. Fourth, they did look they were hugging just like brother and sister. There's nothing wrong with her having a good friend who's a boy."

“So you think I should do nothing? I'm her big brother, I'm supposed to protect her.”

She shrugged. “Do nothing for now and watch them. They're only in first year, they're not going to do anything bad. Watch and see, try and get to know them, too -- especially Harry. I think I will. Good-night, Ron.”

“Good-night, Hermione.” She left and Ron sat there for a few more minutes thinking. He supposed it would not hurt to watch for a few days. She had a point in that they were only in first year and no one ever did anything until at least fourth year. He would wait and watch carefully.

Harry was jumping up and down in his excitement. Ginny was with him doing the same, as were Fred and George. Harry had just been declared the Quidditch team Seeker after the tryouts. Last year's Seeker had been a seventh year who had done it reluctantly because no one else would, and the team's poor record reflected the Seeker's reluctance. The only problem had been a broom, but a quick conversation with his brother had fixed that. Even though Harry was not allowed to bring one to school, Cedric told him he would get Mum and Dad to send him another and Harry could “borrow” his extra.

There was much rejoicing in Gryffindor Tower. As they had a mini-party amongst the team plus Ginny, two more Gryffindors were watching them. One was very thoughtful and the other was alternating between watching them and watching the other watcher. In the end, neither of them said anything to the parties.

As the term continued, things went well for Harry. He learned a lot in classes and was usually the first one to get a spell right. Ginny usually did better on the essay part, but not by much. Quidditch was a joy for Harry and he spent as much time on it as he could, dragging Ginny along as much as possible to watch.

About the only unpleasant part was Draco Malfoy. Fortunately, the boy did not know about the part Harry and Ginny had played in sending his father to prison, but he treated all Gryffindors with disdain and insults. Harry was not happy about it and resolved to come up

with a plan to stop him. One good thing was that Harry had no classes with the Malfoy boy, so Harry only ran into him between classes and other free time when he was not in Gryffindor Tower -- which was very little.

The spring brought a time of great tension to the Diggory family: the Hufflepuff versus Gryffindor Quidditch match. Their parents tried to stay neutral, but it was difficult. To make matters more fun, they had bought a Nimbus 1000 for Cedric's "backup broom", so the two boys had the same model -- although Harry's was two years newer. This was Cedric's first year to competitively play Seeker.

Amos made sure he was at Hogwarts early that morning so he could catch both of his boys at breakfast. Walking into the Great Hall, he found them both eating with their teammates. He walked over to Cedric first.

"How are you doing, son?"

The boy looked up, he had not known his father was there. "Dad!" He jumped up and gave his father a quick hug.

"Doing all right this morning?"

"Sure, Dad. I'm a bit nervous, but I'm sure I'll be OK once we get going."

"Good, good. How do you feel about flying against your brother?"

Cedric smiled. "It'll be a challenge. He really is good, but I'm sure I'll win."

Amos smiled. "And it'll be a clean game?"

"Of course, Dad. I wouldn't have it any other way. I don't want Harry to get hurt either."

He smile and gripped his son's shoulder. "Well, your mother and I will be in the stands rooting both of you on."

"Thanks! We'll see you after the match?"

"You can count on it. Well, let me go over and see Harry. He looks a little green."

"He's just scared of flying against his big brother," Cedric said with a laugh and Amos joined him.

"We'll see. Good luck!" He turned and walked over to his other son. He saw the Headmistress briefly and she smiled at him; he waved and continued on.

"Harry!"

"Dad!" They hugged.

"Doing all right? You look a little green this morning..."

"I'm fine, just a little nerves. I'm always like this."

He smiled. "You're not nervous about playing against your brother are you?"

"Nope, I'll beat him because I'm better," Harry said with a laugh.

"And that's because you'll fly better and it will be a clean game, right?"

"Of course, Dad! I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Harry, time to go!" Oliver called and started walking out the door.

"Gotta go. Will you and Mum watch?"

"Yes son, we'll be watching both of you. Find us after the game."

"Right, bye!" Harry took off. Amos watched him go. He had two wonderful boys and was happy with both of them.

"Hi, Mr Diggory!" came a high-pitched voice.

He looked around and finally saw her. "Hello, Ginny. How are you?"

"Doing good. You're here to watch the game after you delivered your message, huh?"

He chuckled. "Was I that obvious?"

"To me, yes." She shyly glanced down for a second, but she did not pull back from the conversation.

He smiled at her. "Are you enjoying being here with Harry?" He could not resist a little fun.

She blushed a little before nodding.

"I'm glad. I'll see you later, Ginny."

"Bye, Mr Diggory."

Looking around, he saw the Headmistress had finished her breakfast, so he walked towards her. A little conversation to catch up on things before the match seemed like a good idea.

His wife was jumping up and down yelling in her joy. Amos supposed he was not much better considering the the huge grin on his face. The game had been close and came down to whoever caught the Golden Snitch, and it had been quite the battle for it. The twists, the turns, the dives, they all were incredible -- just like his boys.

He rushed down to the field. He would not be able to get to the winner for some time, so he made his way to the other -- the son who was looking at his brother in chagrin and shaking his head. He put his arm around the young man's shoulders.

"You played a fine game son."

"Thanks, Dad, but I can't believe how well he played, how well he flew. I'm so proud of him, despite the fact that he beat me. Look at him on their shoulders, and to think, he learned to fly less than a year ago."

"Harry has talent, that can't be denied. But don't sell yourself short, Cedric; you gave a very fine effort. I think it could have gone either way."

"I don't agree, but thanks. He deserves it." He watched Harry finally come off the shoulders of the Weasley twins, who had been carrying him around. As he came down, their sister came up and gave Harry a big hug and hung on his neck for a moment before she let go, laughing the entire time. Harry was still laughing and carrying on in his joyous celebration. "Yes, he's a very good flyer. Imagine what he'll be like in six more years. If you have a favorite professional team, Dad, you better start getting Harry to like them. I think he could do it."

Amos did not say anything, he did not need to; he just smiled.

A moment later, Harry came running over and gave him a hug and slapped Cedric on the shoulder. "Good game, Ced! I thought you had me a couple of times."

Cedric laughed and gave him a one-armed hug. "I don't think so, Harry. You're too good for me, at least this time. Next time will be another story."

Harry laughed with him. "Thanks, big brother! Maybe I'll let you win next time."

They all laughed. Those are my boys, Amos thought, and I could not be prouder of them.

"Year 2"

Spring turned into summer and Harry's first year came to an end. All in all, Harry thought that Hogwarts was a great place and he had enjoyed every minute of it. When he got his grades back, just before he got on the train, he had been surprised at how good they were, but he, Ginny, and some of the others, even some from the other houses, had formed a study group. It had worked out well for everyone. And when they got stumped, they asked Hermione for help.

Hermione had turned into a really good friend, especially to Ginny. Harry thought it amusing that Hermione and Ginny got along better than Hermione and Ron, given that the other two were in the same year and had known one another for an extra year. But after more thought, he decided it was just a girl thing, although that did not explain why he and Ginny got along so well. In the end, he decided he did not care as long as Ginny stayed his best friend.

After a few days rest, Harry's summer changed from one of relaxation to one of learning again. True to her word, Professor McGonagall had arranged for extra training. Every afternoon, he went through the Floo to the school for lessons with Professor Flitwick. Unbeknownst to him, Professor Flitwick had been a dueling champion in his younger days, so the short man started passing along his knowledge to Harry.

As soon as Ginny had found out what he was doing, she practically demanded to join him. It had been a little tough getting her mother to agree, but her father had finally helped that along. So every day Harry went to The Burrow, then he and Ginny went to summer school.

The twins teased them about the work a little, but usually they asked what the two were learning. Harry suspected they actually were on the lookout for anything that might help them with their pranks.

Ron basically ignored them. He was still the interesting one. He tended to watch Harry, but he never gave him a hard time. A few times he had asked Harry to play chess with him, but after being soundly trounced each time, Harry gave it up.

Harry and Ginny's school routine had just been well established when it had to change. Mr Weasley won the Galleon draw at work and they had decided to take a trip to Egypt for a family holiday to see their oldest son Bill. Ginny was torn in deciding what to do, but her parents ended up taking that decision out of her hands; she was going. The entire family even got their picture in the paper two weeks later. They left in mid-July not to return until mid-August. Harry was really going to miss his best friend.

Harry was doing a little flying this morning to try to take his mind off of missing his best friend. Ginny had been gone for almost a week now. It was a little more than a week until his birthday, so he felt stuck

between events. Professor Flitwick did not really give homework, except for a little bit of reading, and he was all caught up with that. Therefore, he was flying and trying to just relax.

He sort of wished Cedric was home to do something with, but he was away with a friend. He tended to divide his time between home and his friend's house. Harry wished he had a friend he could spend the night with and go do things with like his brother did. Well, he had Ginny to do things with, but both his and her parents tended to not let them do too many things together, and spending the night together was definitely not allowed. After being at school for a year and watching what the older kids did, he supposed he could understand, but he never thought of Ginny "like that".

He did not want to spend the night with Colin. He was not sure about staying in a Muggle house; it sounded too weird. Jack and his other dorm mates were nice guys, but he had not really hit it off with any of them well enough to want to hang out with them all the time. Perhaps his best male friend was Neville Longbottom, but that was a real stretch. In some ways, he was better friends with Hermione than Neville, but he could not spend the night at her house either. He sighed and just looked around as he slowly flew around.

Harry was not sure at first what it was. Eventually he decided that the reason he had seen it was because it moved, and not like a tree in the wind. Deciding to investigate, he slowed down and flew lower, weaving in and out among the trees, not overly far from his house. He was not allowed to go too far away, but he was just within his boundaries, so he did not worry about it.

There, he saw it again and zoomed over to see what it was. In the bushes, he finally found it: it was a large black dog. It was overly thin for its size, but there was no doubt that its back would be up to Harry's waist. He hovered about ten feet off the ground not too far away and just looked at it, trying to decide what to do next. The dog then barked at him. Harry laughed and continued to watch.

Eventually, the dog lay down and with its tongue hanging out of its mouth in a pant; it just stared at Harry. Not knowing what else to do, Harry asked, "Are you thirsty, boy?" He assumed the dog was male. It

barked once and seemed to nod its head. That was weird. "Are you hungry, boy?" Again the dog barked once and nodded his head. "You sure do look like you could gain some weight." The dog barked once again.

"Gee, I'm talking to a dog and he seems to be answering me." He chuckled to himself. "Stay there, boy, and I'll see what I can get you." The dog barked once and stayed, even when Harry started to fly away. "Very weird," he told himself.

In the house, he found a metal bowl, which he filled with water. He found another metal bowl and put some meat in it, left over from last night's dinner. He threw a few veggies in for a balanced meal, though he was not sure the dog would eat them. His mother was in the other room and Cedric was in his room, so if he was not too loud, he should be able to get away with this.

Carefully, he walked back out to where the dog had been, and he was still here. He set both bowls down and backed away. The dog got up and came over. To his surprise, the dog ate everything in the bowl and drank most of the water. Harry realized the dog had no collar and seemed to be a stray.

On a lark, he asked, "Are you a stray?" The dog barked once. "I suppose you don't have a family then. The dog barked twice. Since he had barked once for yes earlier, Harry assumed two barks meant no. That was assuming the dog understood him. Hmm, maybe he was a magical dog of some sort. Harry would not have that class until third year. This was all very strange.

"I wonder if I can talk my parents into letting me keep you," he thought out loud. The dog barked once. "You like that idea?" He barked once again and seemed to bounce up and down before he came over to lick Harry's hand and lay at the boy's feet.

"Of course I have to go to school in the fall, so they probably won't let me." The dog hung his head and seemed to look sad, but then maybe that was just because the dog had a long nose. He was a short-haired dog, Harry noticed, along with the fact that he was all black. Harry petted him and the dog seemed to like it.

"Maybe you can keep me company. I'm really lonely right now. I know I shouldn't be since I have my older brother, but my best friend, that's Ginny Weasley, she's gone on a trip and won't be back for three more weeks. But you probably don't care, do you?" The dog barked twice. Harry grinned. "What, you do care?" The dog barked once. Now Harry laughed. Then he heard his name being called.

"Well, boy, I gotta go. My mum is calling and I have to eat lunch before my special classes this afternoon. If you stay here, I'll bring you some more water and maybe some food later." The dog softly barked once. Harry smiled and ran back to the house. What was the chance that the dog really understood him?

That evening, he was caught trying to sneak food out of the house and had to confess. That caused his parents to go check the dog out. In the end, they let him keep the dog, but only for the summer. At the end of the summer, the dog would have to go find a new home. Harry decided he could live with that, although part of him wondered if he could talk them in to keeping the pet permanently after it had lived with them and they got used to it.

So now that the dog was officially blessed, he fed it regularly and it started gaining weight. After a week, the dog was looking pretty healthy and Harry enjoyed playing with it every morning. Harry would also swear it was the smartest dog in the world; it seemed to always do the right thing when asked.

The day after his birthday, the dog acted a little different. After breakfast, when Harry wanted to go flying, the dog carefully took his hand in its mouth and led him towards the woods. When it was near the bushes Harry had originally found him in, the dog let go of Harry and walked a little bit away.

"What do you want? What are you trying to show me?"

Then the dog did something very amazing, it transformed into a man. Harry stood there in shock for just a moment before he pulled out his wand and leveled it at the man. "Who are you?" The man did not look

like a nice person either. He had long dirty hair, a slight beard, and dirty torn striped clothes. In short, he was very unkempt.

“Harry, my name is Sirius and I'm a friend of your parents. I wasn't really searching for you, at least not yet, because ... well, because I was searching for someone else first. But I would have come to find you next so I could fulfill my duty.”

Harry thought about that. He had heard the name Sirius somewhere else recently, but he could not remember where. “If you're a friend of my parents, then why haven't I heard them talk about you?”

The man shook his head. “I'm sorry, Harry. I don't mean ... uh, them,” he pointed towards the house. “I mean your original parents, your birth parents.”

Harry was surprised. He had not talked about them in a long time. There was no way the dog/man should have known about them. “If that's true, then what's my real name and what are the names of my birth parents?”

“Your real name is Harry James Potter.” Harry gasped. “Your parents were James and Lily Potter. They were murdered on Halloween, in 1981.”

Harry had to sit down, this was overwhelming. He did not put his wand up, but it was now pointed at the ground. He was not sure what to do.

“Your father was my very best friend, Harry, and your mother was a wonderful person. No matter what you might have heard, I did not betray them or do anything else to hurt them, other than to give them some bad advice.” He hung his head, his face becoming invisible as his hair covered it. “But I didn't deserve to go to prison for that.”

Suddenly, Harry remembered where he had heard the name. His parents had been quietly discussing something last week and he had overheard them say, “Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban, we'll have to be careful. He might be after Harry...” Then they had realized he was there and had stopped talking about it.

"What exactly happened? No one has ever told me much more than what's already been said." Harry was curious, but because of what he had heard, he still kept his wand out pointed near the man.

So Sirius launched into the story. He told about the Fidelius Charm and how it worked. He also told about the switching of the secret keeper and his part in trying to mislead people to think he was the secret keeper when Peter had really been. Then he told of the betrayal, the murder, the chase, and finally his capture and imprisonment.

Harry thought about it all; it was a wild tale. As he continued to think about it, one point made no sense at all. "But wait a minute, if you're really not guilty, then why were you in prison? Shouldn't the trial have found out the truth and set you free?"

Sirius shook his head. "If I'd had a trial, then I would have eventually gone free. But it was during a time of war and trials were sometimes overlooked, especially if everyone thought the person was already guilty. Remember, we had made a big effort to say I was the secret keeper, so everyone automatically assumed I had betrayed your parents. Harry, I promise you and will swear any oath you want that I did not betray them. I would have rather died than do that. In fact, that's why I went after Peter. A part of me wanted to die because I felt so guilty in giving your parents the advice to switch secret keepers. That's why I was not there to raise you; that's why you were sent to the Dursleys to live."

"You were to have raised me?"

"I'm your godfather, Harry. It should have been my duty, but I couldn't because I was in prison."

"OK, and who are the Dursleys?"

"You know, your Aunt Petunia and her oaf of a husband Vernon. Dumbledore took you to live with them. I tried to stop it, but he wouldn't hear of it."

Harry shook his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I know a Dumbledore, but I've never heard of the Dursleys."

"No? Then where do you think you grew up?"

"I don't know exactly. Mum and Dad told me that after my parents were killed, I went to live with some people until there was an accident with magic and they couldn't keep me anymore. It also caused me to forget everything. That's why I came to live here, so they could help me learn things again. Mum is a mind healer, so it was easier for her than most people."

Sirius looked like he wanted to be angry, but was not sure. "And what did they tell you of your time before you came here?"

"They told my real name and that they adopted me. They told me my parents had been killed when I was a baby and their real names. For the time after that, they've only told me that I was living with some other people and it did not matter whether I could remember it or not. I've found that I don't really care since I'm happy here."

Sirius gave that some thought. After a moment he chuckled. It was the truth, not all of it, but certainly enough to be believable and to probably hide some things that Harry probably did not really need to know, based on what he knew about Vernon and Petunia Dursley.

"Very well, I can understand that. But did they never mention me or Remus Lupin?" Harry shook his head. "Interesting. Well, I suppose I can just stay here for a few weeks until the Weasleys return, then I'll be on my way."

"Why? What do you want with the Weasleys?" Harry's wand snapped up and pointed it back at the man. He cared about the Weasleys and did not want them to get hurt in any way, especially Ginny.

"Whoa, careful with the wand, Harry..."

"I said, what do you want with them? I will not allow you to hurt them."

Sirius nodded. "Friends of yours, especially Ginny?" Harry nodded. "Is she your girlfriend?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, and I don't need a girlfriend. Now answer the question!"

Slowly and carefully, Sirius reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He was going to hand it to Harry, but they were too far apart. Before he realized what was happening, Harry waved his wand, "Accio Parchment!" To Sirius's amazement, the paper zoomed to Harry's hand. "That's amazing, Harry! I'm very impressed."

"Professor Flitwick taught it to me the other day. This is the picture of the Weasleys from the Galleon draw. What's so special about it?"

"Carefully look at their youngest boy. Ron, I think his name is." Harry nodded. "See what he's holding?"

"Yeah, his pet rat. It's been in the family for years, I understand. So?"

"Harry, you saw how I was a dog, right?" Harry nodded. "There were four of us and we were very close friends: your father, myself, Remus Lupin, and Peter. We were all Animagi; well, except for Remus, but he had another way to become an animal. That rat is Peter, I'd recognize him anywhere. Also notice that his paw is missing a toe. That corresponds to the finger he cut off, as I told you in my story. I want to get there so I can capture that rat and turn him in. If I can bring him in with me, I'll be declared innocent and set free."

"How exactly would you do all of that?" Harry wondered.

"It's really not that hard and you can make it easier for me, Harry."

"Oh? How?"

Sirius laughed. "I've had over ten years to think about this. First, I stay here until the Weasleys return. Then..." By the time Sirius finished, Harry was smiling impishly.

It was a mid-August morning and Harry was in the living room reading through a book that Professor Flitwick had recommended. The

current section was on ways to keep someone where they were after they had been disarmed. The obvious things like tying them up and the body bind were there, but it also discussed doing things like sticking them somewhere and transfiguring their clothes into metal.

As he flipped another page, the fireplace roared to life and a person came out. He barely had time to identify who it was before she launched herself at him. "Harry!" A fraction of a second later, he had two arms full of girl in a hug and her momentum was carrying them across the floor; she ended up on top and they were nose to nose. She seemed to suddenly realize where she was and blushed as she quickly jumped up. There was laughter from across the room.

Harry looked over and saw his mother and brother laughing and grinning, which caused him to blush. Fortunately, his mother snagged his brother's arm and pulled him back into the kitchen to save him further embarrassment.

He looked back at Ginny who was still looking down and was very red from embarrassment. "Hi, Ginny," he said a bit tentatively, "I'm glad you're back."

She was still red faced, but she looked back up and gave him a big smile. "Thanks! I'm glad to be back here again. I really missed you and wished you could have come with us. How have you been?"

Harry couldn't stop the smile from coming to his face. "I've really missed you, too. I've had lessons and Cedric has flown with me some, but it just hasn't been the same without you here." He wasn't sure why, but that seemed to cause her to blush again.

"So you're still doing lessons in the afternoons?" He nodded and she seemed to deflate. "I'm so far behind I'll never catch up now," she said dejectedly.

"It's OK," he tried to comfort her. "Why don't you come this afternoon and see what Professor Flitwick says? You're really smart, and I bet you can catch up if you work some during school. We're going to be stopping lessons after next week anyway, and I can work with you on the stuff you missed."

Her face lit up. "You would?" He nodded. "Thank you, Harry!" She threw her arms around him again in another hug, though this one was shorter like they normally did.

"Oi! We've got a couple of hours, let me show you some stuff now." He jumped up and ran into his room to get a book. They spent the rest of the morning going through the book with Ginny catching on quickly. While Harry forgot about Sirius, the black dog laid on the front porch listening to everything happen inside with a big grin on its face.

Harry watched Ginny work on her shield. Flitwick was helping her with it while he had been practicing casting ropes and chains at a wooden dummy. Their time for the afternoon was almost up and Harry decided it was time to put Sirius's plan into action. They had modified it a few times, but the basic plan was still here.

"Professor Flitwick?" he called when the little man and Ginny had finished. "I, ah, found a mouse or maybe a rat at home that I'd like to catch. Can you conjure a cage for me?"

"Certainly, Mr Diggory." He brandished his wand and little metal cage appeared on a nearby desktop.

"And can you put an Unbreakable Charm on it? I think he's pretty active." Flitwick smiled and cast that charm too. "Thanks, Professor!" Harry grabbed it so they could go.

As they all started walking toward the Floo, Harry asked, "Professor, is Professor McGonagall in her office? I'd like to Floo call her later with a question."

"I believe she is, but is there anything I can help you with?" Flitwick asked conversationally.

"Not at the moment, but you've helped a lot with the cage. We'll see you later, Professor, bye!" Harry threw the Floo powder in, but instead of going to his home, he said, "The Burrow!"

A moment later, he stood in his friend's living room; she came out right behind with a questioning look on her face. "Harry? Why did you come here?"

Now was going to be the trickiest part, or so he thought. "Ginny, I need you to trust me on something. I need to get Ron's rat into this cage so we can look at it."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"Because, I'm not sure it's a normal rat. That's why I had the Professor put an Unbreakable Charm on the cage. Please trust me, Ginny. If we find the rat is missing a toe, it's very important we do this. If not, we can put him back and Ron doesn't have to know."

She looked at him for a very long moment before she nodded and started walking towards the stairs. They managed to get to them with her mother being none the wiser; she also directed him to skip a few steps because they squeaked. They went past her room and on up to Ron's. Luck was smiling on them because he was outside and the rat was curled up on his bed sleeping.

With great care, Harry managed to get the rat into the cage before it even realized what was going on, then he quickly closed and locked the cage. If Harry did not know any better, he would have said the rat's beady little eyes contained fear. Ignoring the eyes, he looked down at the paws, and sure enough, the left paw was missing its "index toe", just like Sirius said it would. Harry could not decide if he was happy or sad about this; he had found his parents betrayer and now he was about to face the man.

Turning to Ginny, he pointed out the missing toe. "See?"

She nodded. "Now what?"

"Now we go make a Floo call." They went back downstairs and into the living room. With a pinch of Floo powder, he threw it into the fireplace. "Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office". His head was spinning and it was a most disagreeable feeling.

Suddenly his head stopped and he could see the office. "Professor McGonagall? It's Harry Diggory." He heard a chair move and then he saw her.

"Good afternoon, Harry." He noticed that she usually used his first name during the summers. "To what do I owe this call?"

"Professor, you told us that if we ever found something magical that we couldn't explain and we thought it might be dangerous to give you a call. Well, I think we need your help."

Her eyebrows shot up. "What have you found?"

"I'm afraid it's rather hard to explain and it would be a lot easier to show you. Can you please come to The Burrow?"

"Certainly. If you'll step back, I shall be there momentarily."

Harry withdrew to find Ginny and her mother staring at him. "Uh, hi Mrs Weasley. Have a good trip?"

"Hello, Harry," she said kindly and smiled at him, but he could tell there was more to her greeting. "It's nice to see you again." She paused for a moment. "Harry? Can you please tell me why you have Ron's rat in a cage and you're making a Floo call?"

Apparently, they had not been as sneaky as he had thought. "Yes, ma'am, but if you'll wait just a moment, I'll explain it when Professor McGonagall gets here."

The woman's eyes shot up in surprise. "Is this something else that my husband needs to be here for?"

"Well, I don't know; but if he is available, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea." This was not part of the plan, but then again, plans changed. He was saved from more questioning from Ginny's mother by the arrival of the Headmistress.

“Harry, Ginny, Molly, good afternoon. Now, what seems to be the problem, Harry?”

“Professor, even though my parents have tried to keep it from me, I've heard that Sirius Black has escaped Azkaban.” The two adults stiffened.

“That is true, Harry. Have you seen him?”

“I think a better question is: Why does everyone think he's a problem? Where is the proof that he did what they say he did?”

“Harry,” she had a forced smile of patience on her, “those are matters for the adults to deal with.”

“Please, Professor. Did he have a trial? Where was the proof that he betrayed ... the Potters? How do you really know he was their secret keeper? Did anyone really see him kill all the Muggles and Peter Pettigrew? Did anyone do a Priori Incantatum on his wand? Where's the proof or are people just making assumptions and working on speculation from circumstantial evidence?”

McGonagall looked at him in amazement before she finally took a seat. “Harry, Sirius Black was James Potter's best friend. Everything we know says he betrayed them.”

“But was it ever proved?” he asked forcefully.

“No, Harry, it was not.”

“So, we've ignored our own laws and jailed an innocent man...”

“Harry, Sirius and the Potters told a few of us they trusted that Sirius was the secret keeper...”

“But what if they did that to misdirect everyone? You know, tell everyone it was Sirius but then they really picked another?”

“That might have been a good way to hide the secret, but it wasn't done,” she said with patience. “Besides, there is no proof.”

Harry was not to be deterred. Reaching to the floor, he picked up the little cage and set it on the low table in front of them. Before anyone could say anything, he pulled out his wand and cast, "Quiesco" on the rat and it fell asleep.

"Mr Diggory!" McGonagall objected.

"That was Ron's rat!" Mrs Weasley exclaimed.

He ignored them both and pulled the rat out of the cage and set it in the middle of an empty space on the floor. "Professor, can you please cast the spell that forces an Animagus to turn back into a human on the rat."

"What are you suggesting?" Her eyes narrowed and it was not hard to see that the witch was thinking very carefully. Perhaps his earlier arguments were starting to sink in.

"I'm suggesting this rat is not a real rat. Please Professor? I know it won't hurt the rat if it's a real rat." Harry waited.

McGonagall pursed her lips and thought for a moment, she looked between the rat and Harry several times as if trying to work something out. Finally, with an air of confidence, she cast the spell. To everyone's surprise, the rat transformed and turned into a man. Harry immediately cast the rope spell to tie him up.

"My word!" McGonagall was aghast. "It's true!" She looked as if a fear had come true.

Mrs Weasley just gasped and put her hand to her chest, absently grasping her clothes and pulling them tighter.

"But if that's Pettigrew, then Black really didn't kill him..." McGonagall started.

"And all the other assumptions are wrong as well," Harry finished.

The professor stared at him suspiciously. "How did you know?"

Harry pulled out the picture of the Weasleys that was in the paper and handed it to her. "Because the rat was in this picture and Sirius recognized him, that's why he escaped. It was to prove his innocence." They all looked at him and he could tell they were jumping to a conclusion. "Yes, I've talked with him and I know where he is hiding. As soon as the Aurors have Pettigrew in custody and they promise that Sirius will be set free, he'll turn himself in."

At that moment, the fireplace flashed green and Mr Weasley stepped out and promptly fell over the unconscious man. "What's this?" he asked from the floor.

"Oh Arthur, you won't believe what's happened this time..." his wife told him. By the end of the story, the two adult Weasleys were looking thoughtfully at Harry, but the boy could not figure out why.

The Aurors came and there were lots of questions. Ron also came in from outside and when he found out that his rat was not really a rat, Harry could not quite decide if the boy's anger was aimed at Pettigrew or himself. Harry decided that avoiding Ron for a while was probably a good plan. Percy was not pleased to have been fooled too, but the older boy did not hang around to discuss it.

As everyone else left and it was just the Weasleys and Harry again, Ginny came over to him. "Harry, you really like an exciting life with many adventures, don't you?" she told him in a teasing voice.

He gave her a small grin. "I don't go searching for them, they just come to me. Besides, it's not just me, you've been there too. And thanks for trusting me."

With a smile that showed pleasure, for which Harry did not understand why, she told him, "Always, Harry, always." She then gave him a quick hug and sent him home telling him she would see him tomorrow.

The next morning, Harry was awakened early by his father and directed to come out to the kitchen. There he found his mother and his dad had a newspaper.

"Son," his father started in a slightly curious tone, "would you like to tell me what you did yesterday afternoon? It seems your name is in the paper for capturing a criminal that we believed to be dead and mostly proving the innocence of a man we believed to be guilty. And if that's not enough, it's possible you may have also started the process of removing our present Minister for Magic. So we'd really like to know how all of this happened and you didn't tell us." Both of his parents were giving him their full attention.

"Ah, maybe we should get Cedric too? I'm sure he'd like to know..." he stalled.

"We can tell him later," his father informed him, obviously eager to get to the bottom of this.

So Harry explained what happened yesterday and answered all of their questions but one. "I'm sorry, dad, but I won't tell you how I talked to Sirius until he's been promised fair treatment. I promised I'd protect him."

"Very well, son, I do want you to keep your promises. But, I would strongly suggest that in the future, you be more careful what you promise."

"I understand, Dad, but I had to help him. No one should go to prison for something they didn't do."

His father smiled at him and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I know, and you're a good lad. I'm very proud of you for sticking up for the innocent. I do wish you weren't quite so adventurous, though."

Harry smiled and hugged his father. "Thanks, Dad."

"I love you, son."

"And I love you, Dad."

That was not the end of the story though. A few days later, Sirius had turned himself in and was promptly set free. That led to an interview in the Daily Prophet, which was read in almost every Wizarding household the next morning, including the Diggory home.

Again, Harry was awakened early and told to follow his father. This time, he found his entire family in the kitchen. His brother was as bleary-eyed as he was.

"Harry," his father started solemnly, "yesterday, Sirius Black was exonerated and set free." Harry smiled. "I wouldn't be smiling so much if I were you," his father told him seriously.

For the life of him, he could not figure out what was bad about this. "What's wrong, Dad?"

"It seems that in your plans to save him, you forgot one small but extremely important detail." Harry gave him a puzzled look. "Let me read a portion of the main article."

One of the more surprising aspects of this story is how Mr Black was found and his true story came to light. It seems that while he was tracking down Peter Pettigrew, he came upon none other than The Boy-Who-Lived. "I was quite surprised to find James's son, Harry, on my way to find the rat, but Harry believed in me and my story and I have him to thank for my freedom. Although he is my godson, I shall never forget what Harry Potter has done for me."

The Wizarding World has wondered what happened to Harry Potter, orphaned after his parents were killed on that fateful night in 1981. His disappearance was a mystery, but a bigger mystery was his failing to come to Hogwarts as expected in 1991. Now we know that he has been staying with Amos and Delores Diggory, taking their last name, and he is also going to Hogwarts, but why did he start school a year late? No one we've questioned will answer.

"It seems that in your planning, you two forgot to remember to keep your real name secret. So when Mr Black gave his interview, he mentioned your real name and now the whole world will know where you live and what you're doing."

At his father's pronouncement, Harry lowered his head and softly banged it on the table. "I was really stupid, wasn't I?"

His father sighed. "No, Harry, you're only barely thirteen. As I told you before, you did a fine thing; it's just that it's very unfortunate for this information to get out. We will deal with it." Harry looked up and nodded. "Now, we need to get our story straight and present a united front. The big question you're going to get asked is where you were from the time your parents died to the time you started Hogwarts. We can say anything you'd like, but I think the best answer is to tell everyone that it's a private matter and none of their concern. You'll still get badgered, but stick to your answer. Eventually, it will all calm down and then you'll just have normal fame to deal with."

Harry dropped his head back down and banged it again. "Just what I don't need."

A few miles away in another Wizarding home, another family was gathered around the breakfast table, but a much different conversation was going on. This table had a little girl at it and she had been continually red for the last few minutes, mostly due to her brother's teasing.

"You're lucky, Ginny," Fred told her.

"You've got an inside track to The Boy-Who-Lived," George continued.

"Yeah, think of all the other girls..."

"And how jealous they will be of you."

Ginny tried to back away from the table but mainly only managed to shove her elbow into the butter dish.

"Oi! Smooth one, Ginny. Be glad Harry didn't see that," Ron teased her.

"Shut it! All of you!" she finally yelled as she grabbed her napkin to clean her elbow.

"Boys!" their mother yelled. "That is more than enough. In fact, go de-gnome the garden, all three of you. Now!" With that tone, they knew to jump and left quickly. With a forced calm, she turned to her last son remaining. "Percy, please find somewhere else to be."

"Yes, mother. I shall be in my room." He went up the stairs, leaving only Ginny and her parents.

In a soft voice, her mother told her, "Ginny, dear. I think I understand what you're feeling, but you really don't have anything to worry about."

"But he should have, he will, I mean, oh I don't know what I mean..." she was confused and scared. How could Harry do this to her?

"Ginny," her father got her attention. "You must understand that Harry did not lie to you to hurt your feelings. I'm sure his parents told him not to tell anyone. Do you remember how they stressed safety and not telling anyone about him when you first met him?"

She nodded.

"That's probably all it is. You can ask him when you see him this afternoon. He's a good boy and I know he'll tell you the truth when he's allowed to. But you have to understand that sometimes people have to say nothing or mislead you if they have special circumstances because they are in danger. Now I don't know what Harry's circumstances are, but I can tell by the things that are said and who's saying them that Harry does have special circumstances. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Dad." That did make sense to her; after all, how many of the students could Floo call the Headmistress and have her come to their house? And how many students had extra summer lessons on Defense? She would not have if it was not for Harry asking for her. "You're right, Dad. I just never thought of it that way."

"That's my girl." He patted her hand. "If it will make you feel any better, your mother and I knew something wasn't right, and we should have figured out who Harry really was sooner, but we didn't."

Ginny nodded and gave a small smile to show she appreciated his sharing that. It made her feel not as stupid.

"I have to go to work, but you take a deep breath and talk to Harry. He'll still be your friend just like before." He kissed her on the top of her head and left.

Ginny looked at her mother. "He's right, you know. Harry had a very good reason to not tell you who he really was." She nodded knowing her mother was right in her head, and yet, she still did not like it.

"Tell me, Ginny, how do you feel about Harry now that you know who he really is?"

That was the big question. It was not a secret in her family that she had loved the story of The Boy-Who-Lived when she was a little girl. She supposed it was the usual like of a hero who beat overwhelming odds to win -- the story of a baby who survived when he should not have. That was Harry Potter.

Then there was Harry who was her neighbor, who did practically everything with her and was her very best friend.

The problem was, those two Harrys were the same person. Did she feel the same about each of them? Also, would the new Harry still want to be her best friend?

She looked at her mother. "Mum, I just don't want to lose my best friend."

Her mother smiled. "Don't worry, Ginny. Harry will still like you for who you are. He's still the same Harry. He'll have some new problems now, but you can still be his best friend by being there for him. Tell me, if I had asked you yesterday how you felt about Harry, what would you have told me?"

Ginny shrugged. "He's my best friend, he's a great flyer, and uh," she paused and blushed slightly, "he's kinda cute."

Another smile came over her mother's face. "He was just a normal boy that you like, wasn't he?" Ginny nodded. "Then that's what you need to do, Ginny. Treat him like the normal boy he was yesterday and be his friend, especially when things become difficult because

people now know who he really is. Treat him like Harry Diggory not like The Boy-Who-Lived.”

Ginny considered that and understood what her mother was saying, and she thought her mother was right. Harry would want to be normal not some famous celebrity. “It may be a bit hard at first, but I think I can do that.”

“I know you can, dear. Now, I'll talk with the boys to tell them to treat Harry normally too. You go clean your room and then come back for lunch. You and Harry can talk about this when you go to class this afternoon.”

Standing up, Ginny went over to her mother and gave her a hug. “Thanks, Mum!” She went upstairs feeling a lot better while her mother went out to the back garden for another talk.

After lunch, just like normal, Harry took the Floo to The Burrow. Only because her mother said so, Ginny was the only one in the living room waiting on Harry. When he came out of the fireplace, Ginny did her best to give him a normal smile. “Hi!”

“Hi, Ginny. Are you ready to go to class?”

“Yes.” She stood and walked over to him. As he was about to turn to go, she reached out and grabbed his hand, which caused him to whip around and look at her. “Harry?” she said tentatively.

He immediately looked down, guilt written all over his face. “I'm sorry, Ginny, but I wasn't supposed to tell anyone.”

She gave him a small smile. “It was for your safety, wasn't it?”

“And for everyone else around me,” he added, still not able to look at her.

Her smile grew as she thought about what she was about to do. “I'll forgive you if you'll be my best friend -- Harry Diggory.”

Harry finally looked up at her and a smile came to his face. “Only if you'll be my best friend.”

"It's a deal."

"Deal. Come on, we have to get going to class."

Ginny let go of his hand and they took the Floo to school.

Around the edge of the doorway in the kitchen, a mother smiled to herself.

As the summer continued, Harry found that all of the Weasleys treated him the same except for Ron. Ron was never rude or anything, but he seemed to become a bit more distant. Harry also caught Ron watching him more often. He had no idea why, and when he mentioned it to Ginny, she was also at a loss to explain her brother's actions.

By the time school started, Ginny had done half of the work she had missed over the summer. She was itching to finish quickly. Professor Flitwick had told them that he would continue the practical defense lessons for a few hours every Saturday they were all free.

The train ride to school was a blast. Their study group got a compartment together and told stories of their summer. Harry's change from Diggory to Potter was the most talked about topic, to his dismay. It was a tight fit with them all there, but a good time was had by all. Hermione even came by and stood in the doorway and talked to them. Like everyone else, she was excited to hear about what Harry had done to free his godfather and about his real identity.

At the Welcoming Feast, Harry saw Remus Lupin for the first time. He knew all about him from Sirius and looked forward to talking to the man during some of his free time. It looked like his second year was going to be a wonderful year.

In the end, it mostly was a good year. He learned a lot and had fun with Ginny and others, whom he was slowly becoming better friends with. Harry decided that Colin was not quite so bad after he got used to him, and after he had had a short talk with his friend about not taking so many pictures of Harry.

There were some bad parts. A story came out in the Daily Prophet at the end of the year saying that Professor Lupin was a werewolf and what a bad thing it was to have a half-breed like him teaching at Britain's premier magic school. That forced him to resign. In a private conversation, Professor Lupin told him that it was probably someone at the Ministry who did not like werewolves, but that was life. Harry was sad for his new found friend of his parents.

One other bad thing happened: Draco Malfoy now made Harry a bigger target for his insults. He was always very careful to do it there were no teachers around. Normally, Harry ignored him, but he also sometimes said things about Ginny, and Harry was going to stop that one day -- forcefully.

“Year 3”

The summer after his second year started off like last summer. He had free time in the morning and lessons with Professor Flitwick in the afternoon. Ginny still joined him. She was doing really well, but Harry did just a little bit better; he always seemed to be able to get more power into his spells.

A major question presented itself after Harry had come home: Did Harry want to go live with Sirius? He thought long and hard about it, but decided to stay where he was. He thought he could write Sirius for a while to get to know him better.

Not long before his birthday, Harry got a surprise one evening at dinner.

“Cedric, Harry?” Amos looked at both of his sons. “If I could get tickets to the Quidditch World Cup, would you like to go?” he asked casually. He took joy in watching both of his sons light up and shout for joy. “Well, then I suppose it's good news that was able to procure three tickets.” The boys whooped again.

“Dad? Are the Weasleys going to go?” Harry wanted to know.

Amos smiled. “Yes, and yes, I know that Arthur got enough tickets for Ginny to go, too.” Harry whooped yet again.

"It's a good thing your girlfriend can go," Cedric teased him.

"She's not my girlfriend," Harry shot back, though he also looked a little red from embarrassment. "She's my best friend."

"That's all right, Harry," his mother consoled him with a grin on her face, "don't worry about it. Of course, Amos was my best friend in seventh year and look what it got me." Harry turned even redder when he understood what she meant. Cedric laughed and Harry backhanded him on the shoulder.

"Boys! No horseplay around the table," Amos told them, but he was not really bothered. This would be a good time.

To Harry's pleasure, they managed to reserve the camping site next to the Weasleys. The surprise of the day was that Hermione and Neville had also showed up, as friends of Ron; although Harry suspected that Ginny may have been a bigger influence in getting Hermione to come. Cedric went and found some of his seventh year friends while Harry hung out with the Weasleys and specifically Ginny. His father tagged along and spent most of his time talking to Ginny's dad.

The game had been awesome, and Viktor Krum's play been spectacular. However, the event had been ruined by some Death Eaters after the match and someone had cast a Dark Mark. It was even more weird when they found Ron's wand missing and that it had been the one to cast the Dark Mark. Still, they managed to survive and get home, although it was to two worried mothers.

Harry's third year started off being very busy. In addition to all of his normal classes, he now had three more: Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes. He and Ginny had decided to take the same classes, and after a discussion with Hermione, they felt those classes would be best for them. A few stories from Ron had also convinced them that Divination was definitely a class to be avoided.

This year, the Defense classes were again taught by an Auror, Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody. Harry and Ginny both decided they liked the strange and scary looking man, once they started ignoring his gruff manner. He seemed to really know his stuff.

The Triwizard Tournament generated a lot of interest among the students. Harry and Ginny talked about it as excitedly as the rest of their friends, all knowing it made no difference as none of them were old enough to enter. So when Harry's name came out of the Goblet of Fire as the fourth contestant, he got a lot of strange looks. He would not have gone up had it not been for the Headmistress beckoning him and Hermione pushing him out of his seat.

In the trophy room with the rest of the contestants, Fleur, the Beauxbatons champion asked him what he was doing there. Since he did not really know himself, he just shrugged. Before they could ask him more questions, Professors McGonagall, Moody, and Flitwick came in.

"Mr Potter, did you put your name in the Goblet?" the Headmistress asked him.

"No, Professor."

"Did you ask an older student to put your name in?"

"No, Professor. I don't want to be in the Tournament," he told her firmly, looking at his brother for help.

"You don't have much choice," an older man who had been introduced earlier as Barty Crouch said. "It's a magically binding contract. You have to participate."

"But I did not enter my name!" Harry protested.

Crouch thought about that for a few seconds. "I'm afraid that does not matter according to the rules. They say you must compete. I'm sorry."

"But why would anyone enter my name in?" Harry wanted to know.

"The survival of contestants is not guaranteed," Moody's gravelly voice answered from behind Harry.

"Alastor! Please!" the Headmistress admonished him before address the rest of the Tournament Committee. "We shall just have to have four champions then."

"That is not fair," Headmaster Karkaroff protested.

"Then we want two champions as well," Madame Maxime argued.

"I'm afraid that's not possible either," Crouch replied. "Once the Goblet has turned off, that's it until the next time it's activated, and that's not possible until the present tournament is completed."

"Well, I'm not going to compete. I will not compete against my brother!" With that declaration, Harry hurriedly turned around to leave and accidentally ran into and knocked over Professor Moody, who happened to be trying to take a swig from his hip flask, a flask that went flying and landed at the feet of Professor Flitwick.

As Moody carefully got up, with Harry apologizing for knocking him over, Flitwick bent down to pick up the open flask which had spilled slightly. As the odor from the flask reached the Charms Professor, he sniffed carefully. "That smells like Polyjuice Potion." That simple statement caused everyone to look at Moody, who immediately drew his wand and started firing Stunning spells -- the first hitting McGonagall's pointy hat and knocking it off her head as she dove behind a chair for some cover.

Everyone scrambled behind the nearest piece of furniture or hit the floor to allow the spells to go flashing overhead. Moody tried to walk backward to get away while he shot spells to keep everyone's head down, but he failed to see Harry on the floor near him. As he took another step backwards, Harry reached out and grabbed his artificial leg and yanked hard and fast. The grizzled Auror lost his balance and fell, hitting his head on the way down. When he just laid there without moving, Harry also reached out and grabbed the man's wand and held it on him.

Since the spells had stopped, everyone started coming out and saw Harry standing over Moody.

“What the bloody hell happened?” Bagman exclaimed.

“I've never seen anything like it,” Madame Maxime said as she looked at the downed man.

“Look at him now!” Fleur shouted as she pointed to Moody. Indeed, the man on the floor was starting to morph. His artificial leg and eye fell off and a much younger man with straw colored hair was now lying there.

“No...” Crouch hoarsely protested and collapsed into a chair.

“What is Barty Crouch Jr doing here?” Flitwick asked. No one had an answer, not even his father. “Harry, please tie him up. I shall return with Aurors in a few minutes.” He left to go to the Floo in his office.

Nearly ten minutes later, Rufus Scrimgeour, the new Director of the MLE, and Kingsley Shacklebolt came in with Flitwick. “I thought he was dead,” Scrimgeour stated as he looked at the trussed up young man.

“No,” Crouch Sr spoke into the silence. “I had better come in with you.” Silently he handed his wand to Shacklebolt, who took it along with the wand Harry had been holding from the fake Mad-Eye.

“Where's the real Moody?” McGonagall asked.

“He would have to be nearby to contribute to the Polyjuice. We need to check his quarters,” Flitwick suggested. “May I search the prisoner for keys?” he asked the Aurors.

“I'll do it,” Shacklebolt told him. A moment later, he handed a ring of keys to the Charms professor.

Harry surprised everyone by speaking. “Well, now that we know the Tournament was rigged, as it is obvious he must have entered my name for me, I won't have to do it now.”

Crouch Sr turned to the boy. "I'm sorry, Mr Potter, but there's nothing in the rules that allow for the Tournament to be stopped, even for a case such as this. I know as I helped write the rules."

"That's stupid!" Harry let his true feelings be known on the matter. He also found it interesting that none of the adults admonished him for his outburst; apparently, they agreed with him.

"Barty, we may have to have the Tournament anyway, but is there anything in the rules that says we have to have the same tasks we originally agreed upon?" Flitwick asked.

"No, the tasks are whatever the committee agrees upon and are changeable right up until the moment they are started. It would only take a unanimous vote to change them. Why do you ask?"

A smile came over Flitwick face. "What if we changed the tasks to something very simple in order to quickly complete this rigged Tournament, as Mr Potter calls it, then we can restart the Goblet and try again with the correct champions and the original tasks?"

"A capital idea, Filius!" Bagman agreed. "That would let young Mr Potter off the hook and then I'm sure the other champions would be picked again."

"They would if they were the only three names entered and the Goblet was locked up until the time expired," McGonagall commented. "I like that idea. Any other suggestions?" No one said anything. "All in favor of this change, vote Aye." She got four Ayes along with her own. "It's unanimous then."

"I suggest a flying race on brooms," Karkaroff suggested.

"And I suggest a game of Gobstones," Maxime suggested.

"Exploding snap for the third?" McGonagall half asked half stated. She received nods all around. "Vote Aye for those three tasks." It was unanimous again. "And do them all tomorrow?" Everyone agreed.

"I'll put up one hundred Galleons for the prize money," Crouch Sr said. "It seems only fair since my son was the one who did this. That way the other prize money will still be available for the real tournament."

"Very well, the times of each event will be announced at breakfast. This meeting is adjourned. Mr Potter, Mr Diggory, have a pleasant evening," McGonagall dismissed her students.

The two brothers left together. Harry looked up at Cedric. "Cedric, I'm really sorry for this. You should have all the attention."

He smiled and looked down at his little brother. "Don't worry about it, Harry. As we found out, it wasn't your fault." He then snorted. "You know though, we need to go tell the others. I know a person in Ravenclaw to go talk to," he blushed slightly, "so I'll tell them and Hufflepuff. You tell the Gryffindors. I guess the Slytherins will just have to wait and find out at breakfast."

"Thanks Ced! We'll get this part out of the way tomorrow, and then I'll get all the Gryffindors to cheer for you in the real Tournament."

Cedric put his arm around Harry and gave him a squeeze. "Thanks, Harry! You're the best little brother a guy could have. Go have fun tonight and tomorrow have a day of games just like at home."

Harry smiled and turned for the Tower. He was glad it had all worked out. It was a good thing Harry was in a good mood, because when he went through the portrait hole into the Tower, he walked into the middle of screaming match between two redheads.

"You're just a jealous git, Ron! Harry did NOT enter himself in the Tournament. There's another explanation!" Ginny screamed at her brother in front of the rest of the house.

"Yeah? You're just blinded by fame and your stupid crush on The Boy-Who-Lived!" Ron yelled back.

A second later there was a resounding crack echoing through the common room and a very red handprint on Ron's face. As Ron's hand went back, a voice stopped everything.

"Start that swing and I'll make you regret it for a long time to come!" Everyone turned to see an angry looking Harry Potter standing by the portrait hole with his wand pointed at Ron Weasley. As he hesitated, Harry went on. "Step back from her, Ron." When the boy did not move, Harry shouted, "Now!" Ron took two steps back and lowered his hand.

"Now, for your and everyone else's information, I did not enter my name into the Goblet." Murmuring started. "But if you'll be quiet, I'll tell you what did happen." Everyone immediately shut up and looked at him eagerly.

"There was an imposter on Polyjuice pretending to be Professor Moody, and he entered my name into the Goblet."

Shouts of "What?" "No way!" "I can't believe it!" came from all around the room.

"It's true," Harry told them. "Tomorrow at breakfast, we're to be told when we compete in the new substitute tasks. There will be a flying contest, a Gobstones contest, and an exploding snap contest."

"That's all?" Lee Jordan exclaimed.

"They came up with three simple tasks to get the rigged Tournament over with. After that, they will relight the Goblet, put the other three names back into it, then let it select their names again and the real Tournament will happen -- thankfully without me in it."

"Why did he put your name your name in?" Harry was not surprised that Hermione was the one who asked.

"Until the investigation is over, everyone believes the answer is to get me killed during one of the tasks." That started a lot more questions, which Harry ignored.

"Harry, can we still root for you?" Lee asked.

Harry laughed. "Sure, whatever you want. That's it, there's nothing more to say."

"Then let's party!" Fred shouted.

"And party hardy!" George added.

Harry smiled and walked over to Ginny, who had calmed down -- mostly. Ron was now on the other side of the room by Dean and Seamus, who had dragged him over there for his own safety.

"You alright there, Ginny?" he asked her softly.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She blushed a little. "Thank you for proving me right."

"I didn't have to do anything, you knew what was right, even if you didn't know how. I'm just glad I came in when I did. I can't believe he was going to hit you."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't think he really would have swung, but thanks for giving him extra incentive to think about it." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him. As she did, she saw Ron watching them and it looked like he was going to come over. So she glared at him and shook her head 'no' just slightly. That froze him in his tracks.

She let Harry go after a long hug. "I don't think he'll do anything, but watch out for Ron. I don't know what his problem is, but I think it's only him being overly protective. Good-night, Harry." She left him to go to her room, although she stopped by her twin brothers first.

"Hey, will you two keep an eye on Ron? I don't know what his problem is, but I don't want Ron to get into trouble or hurt, because he will if he does something to Harry."

"Yeah, you'd really take care of Ron if he tried something, wouldn't you?" Fred told her.

"I would, but Harry would hurt him first," she informed them.

"But he's only a third year..." George started.

"Hey! Have you two forgotten about all the extra lessons Harry and I have been taking over the last two years?" Ginny reminded them.

"Oh, yeah..."

"We forgot."

"Maybe you should remind Ron. Good-night." Ginny went to bed, curious about tomorrow.

Harry had watched her talk to her brothers as a few people had come up to talk to him. As soon as she was safely upstairs, he left for his dorm room. He suspected that after a night's sleep, Ron would not be a problem anymore.

As soon as Harry had left, the twins paid a visit to their younger brother. He was much paler when they finished.

The next morning at breakfast, the changes to the current Tournament were announced. Only the Slytherins were surprised. It was also announced that the Gobstone contest would be held at ten, the exploding snap contest at one, and the broom race through an obstacle course would be at three, with the point leader getting a head start in the race.

Ginny sat beside him during the announcements to give him courage, or so she said. Harry was not worried, but he liked having his best friend there anyway. He noticed that Ron sat far down the table from him, but otherwise did not give either of them any trouble.

At ten o'clock, everyone gathered in the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall had transfigured the tables into grandstand-style seating so everyone could see. By eleven o'clock, Fleur had won, with Harry being second, Cedric third, and Viktor fourth.

After lunch, the Exploding Snap contest started. Professor McGonagall had picked well as Cedric came in first, Harry second, Viktor third, and Fleur fourth. Just like in the real tournament, their scores decided when they would start on the last task. Harry and

Cedric were tied and would leave first, Fleur would start five seconds later, and Viktor would start five seconds after Fleur. Still, everyone thought Viktor would win since he was a professional Quidditch player.

Slightly before three, much to Ron's consternation and glare, Ginny gave Harry a firm hug and wished him luck. The course was set up around the school ground with magical arrows in the air showing them where to go. To complete it, one would have to perform all kinds of turns, twists, and avoiding things while going as fast as possible.

Harry and Cedric both had their Nimbus 1000's, Fleur had some French broom, and Viktor had a Firebolt. Fortunately for the other three, there were no long straight runs, so the Firebolt's top speed would not be much of a factor.

The race started. Harry and Cedric raced neck and neck toward the first turn. It was a sharp right with the next target down at a 45 degree angle. Harry's small size gave him a very slight advantage and he took it. He was also the more daring of the two brothers. By the time he came around the fourth target and headed for the flaming ring he had to fly through, he was two broom lengths in front of Cedric. Fleur was slowly falling behind, and Viktor had almost caught up with Fleur, despite starting five seconds behind her.

Harry rocketed through a corkscrew going up then flipped over to dive back down towards a bar only five feet above the ground. Those with no guts would have to slow down to safely make it, Harry never slowed. As he came out of the last turn, Harry lay completely flat on his broomstick and urged it to go as fast as possible down across the last hundred yards to the finish line inside the Quidditch stadium. As he crossed over the finish line, he looked back and saw his brother come in second about five seconds later with Viktor right on his tail three lengths behind. Fleur finished fourth almost five seconds later.

The crowd was roaring and Harry held his hands up in victory as he slowly turned and landed next to the judges; the others landed beside him.

Cedric hugged him. "Great job little brother!"

"Thanks! You too!" He turned to Viktor and held out his hand, Viktor took it. "Great race! I'm glad you didn't start any sooner or you would have won."

Viktor smiled at him. "No, I don't t'ink so. You fly very good, Harry Potter. Maybe you be Quidditch star some day."

Harry laughed. To be polite, he turned to Fleur. "Good race." She smiled at him and he felt a slight twinge of something, but didn't know what it was. He shook her hand as he had with Viktor.

"You are not 'ust a lettles boy, Harry Potter. Perhaps I am glad you will not be in the real tournament."

He shrugged. "I know I'm glad not to have to be in it." She smiled at him. He turned to Ludo Bagman who was walking over to him with a small bag in his had.

"Sonus! Ladies and gentlemen. For this running of the Triwizard Tournament, the most unusual one in its history, we award first place and one hundred Galleons to Mr Harry Potter!" The crowd screamed and clapped. "Yes, good showing, Mr Potter. It is fitting that you've won, now the other three can compete in the next tournament, to start in a few days. Congratulations again, Mr Potter. Quietus!"

As Harry left the front area, Ginny came running to him and gave him a long hug and kissed him on the cheek. "I knew you could do it, Harry!" He blushed mightily. His parents came over as well, both of them with large smiles on their faces. He figured they must have seen what Ginny had done.

"Congratulations, son. I'm proud of you. I'm also glad you don't have to compete in the real tournament, not that I'm overly thrilled about Cedric doing it," his father told him as he hugged him.

"Thanks, Dad!"

"Good show, Harry." His mother hugged him too. He noticed that his father was already talking to Cedric. He did not want to be his brother

right now, having to explain why he was in the tournament. "I agree with your father on this. I'm very glad you're not in the real tournament, and I'm sorry you thought you were for a short while. I'm so glad they caught that Death Eater."

"Me too, Mum, me too."

Apparently more than his parents had seen Ginny kiss him, as he was teased by a number of people, but he didn't care. He just smiled and shrugged. Apparently, that was the right thing to do as Ginny smiled and stayed near him; she did not seem to be mad at all.

A few days later, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor were chosen at the next choosing of the champions. The Goblet had been very thoroughly examined for extraneous charms and only one Confundus Charm had been found on it, and removed.

Three weeks later, the first task was held and Harry was doubly happy not to be in the tournament when he saw the dragons. When it was over, all three scores were very close, only a few points between them. Still, Viktor was in first, Fleur in second, and Cedric was very close behind in third. He congratulated his brother and told him he would easily catch up in the next task.

In early December, an unexpected task was announced, at least for the older students. There was to be a Yule Ball for the fourth years and up. The first three years would each have a party in their common room.

When they heard, Harry was excited. He turned to Ginny. "You heard that? We get to have a party."

"But wouldn't you rather go to the Ball?" Ginny asked him.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, I've never been to a Ball. Mum showed me how to dance once, but it wasn't nearly as good as flying."

Ginny laughed. "Harry, nothing is as good as flying to you."

"Too right," he grinned. "But you know what?" he asked her more seriously. When she shook her head no, he told her, "If we went to

the Ball, I'd ask you. I wouldn't want to go with anyone other than my best friend."

She gave him a quick hug. "Thanks, Harry, that's sweet."

He blushed slightly. "So anyway, I'm glad we'll be together at the party." She smiled at him and they went on to lunch.

Classes had finished for the term and the Yule Ball was tonight. The few older guys who did not have dates were starting to panic. Harry had watched a few, one of them being Ron Weasley. He had had a flaming row with Hermione about going, especially after she refused to tell him who had asked her.

Harry was sitting on their usual couch pulling a book out to read. Ginny saw him as she came down the girl's stairs and started walking over to join him. Just before she arrived, she was stopped by Neville Longbottom. "Hey, Ginny?"

"Hi, Neville."

"Ginny, ar-are you g-going with anyone to the B-Ball?" Neville was obviously nervous; but she noticed more than that. Past Neville's shoulder she saw Harry stiffen and go wide-eyed.

"No, I --" She never got to finish.

"W-Will you g-go with m-me to the B-Ball?" She was surprised and pleased to be asked. She would not get to go otherwise, and Neville was a friend and nice person. He would treat her right. And yet, could she really go with him?

"Neville, I'd like --" and she stopped instantly as she saw Harry stand and practically run up the boy's stairs. Neville saw him go too.

"I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't think this through..."

"It's all right, Neville. I'd like to go, thank you for asking, but I think the answer needs to be no." She hated turning him down and the look on his face was the reason why. He looked really dejected. "Neville? Try

asking Parvati. I know she doesn't have a date yet and I've heard she likes you."

"Really?" he looked very surprised to hear that.

"Really. If you'll excuse me, I need to go do something."

"Sure, no problem; thanks for the advice, Ginny," he told her as she hurried off and waved at him over her shoulder.

She raced up the stairs to the boy's dorms, glad she could get up them. On the second level where she knew Harry's room was, she came to a halt and peered in. He was standing by the window looking out and he was the only one in there. She walked up behind him, making sure to shuffle her feet a few times to make some noise. She did not want to startle him; she had first-hand experience in Flitwick's lessons that that was a bad thing to do.

As she came up behind him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and put her chin on his shoulder; he did not move.

"Harry, it's OK." He did not respond. "Harry, I told Neville no; I'd rather be with you at the party than with him at the Ball."

After a moment she heard him softly say, "You did?"

"Yes, Harry, I did," she told him as sincerely as she could.

"But I heard you say you'd like to go." He sounded very confused.

She sighed. "I told him that I'd like to go, but that I couldn't. Listen carefully. I'd like to go to the Ball. It would be a lot of fun. But I only want to go with you," she hated to say this next part, but she did, "my best friend." Then the thought occurred to her that maybe she really did not have to stop there.

He slowly turned around and she loosened her grip but kept her arms around him so she was embracing him. He slowly put his hands on her shoulders. "Only with me?" He still sounded so unsure.

Ginny nodded. "Only with you, Harry." Usually she hugged him or they hugged at the same time. For one of the few times ever, he hugged her first.

"I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable, Ginny. You're not mine like that. If you want to go, you should be able to go," he told her, whispering in her ear. The experience of his face in her hair was very pleasant, but his voice seem to indicate he did not believe what he had said.

"But I don't want to go with anyone else." Her mother might be upset with her for doing this, but that was just too bad she decided. "Harry, I like you."

"I like you, too, Ginny. That's why you're my best friend."

She closed her eyes and rolled them. "Harry, I mean I like you." She put extra emphasis on the all important word. "I like my best friend so much, I wish we had more." There, now she had done it; her mother would be scandalized that she was this forward.

It only took a full second, but he suddenly jerked his head back so he could look at her face. He looked very serious and she could tell he was thinking deeply about what she had said. He had obviously understood her. He stared into her eyes. She was perfectly fine with that as she thought she could lose herself in his green eyes all day long.

"Are you sure, Ginny? I couldn't bear to lose my best friend." She nodded.

Then she realized he had closed his eyes as he was slowly leaning down towards her. One of her fantasies was about to come true she realized. His lips soon touched hers and it was wonderful. She lost herself in the kiss and was saddened when it ended. He pulled her back to him and she rested her chin on the top of his shoulder as they hugged again.

"Will you be my girlfriend?" he quietly asked her.

She pulled her head back and smiled before she softly kissed him. "Yes," she impishly told him when they parted.

After a moment, he asked, "Do you suppose I should thank Neville for helping us get together?"

Ginny giggled softly. "I don't think it's necessary. Besides, I already helped him out by telling him to ask Parvati. She's liked him for a while."

Harry continued to hold her. "The only person I'm worried about is Ron. What do you think he'll do?"

She sighed as she thought about it. "If he's smart, nothing; but there's no guarantee that he'll think first. How about we don't say anything to him, then tomorrow morning I'll have a talk with him and set him straight?"

"Only if it's in the common room. I want to make sure he doesn't do anything too stupid."

Ginny could not help but chuckle. "OK, but don't worry about it. I'll probably start the talk with my wand in my hand so he knows I mean business." She tilted her head up slightly and softly kissed him again. With a smile, she commanded him, "Wait here for a minute, and then come down. Hopefully that will avoid problems." He nodded so she left, already missing his warmth as she walked down the stairs. She would write Mum a letter tomorrow; Ginny was sure she would be happy for her.

Harry and Ginny were in the common room playing a game of chess when most of the older boys went upstairs, including Ron. He did not have a date, but he was going anyway, just to find out who was taking Hermione, or so Ginny assumed.

A few minutes later, a single girl came down the girl's stairs. "Wow!" Ginny was amazed.

"Wow!" Harry echoed her, only to receive a light backhanded slap on the shoulder. They both got up and went over to her as she came into the common room. "Very nice, Hermione. So who's the boy?"

Hermione smiled at her two friends. "No telling Ron?" Harry nodded. "Viktor Krum."

Harry looked at her and then he began to chuckle, which turned into outright laughter. Hermione looked a little hurt. Once he realized that, he waved his hand. "No, no, that's ... so priceless. I wish I could see Ron's reaction to that. He's going to have a fit with the way he's been acting."

Ginny was smiling and nodding. "I agree. So why are you down here so early?"

"Oh, well, I wanted to leave while the boys were all getting ready and they wouldn't see me. I told Viktor I'd meet him at the front door away from everyone. I wanted it to be a surprise," Hermione stated as if it should be the most obvious thing in the world.

Hermione looked at Ginny and smiled. "So, why does Harry have his arm around you and his hand on your shoulder?"

Ginny gave her friend a big grin. "He asked me to be his girlfriend just a little bit ago."

Hermione gasped slightly and gave Ginny a hug, before she turned to Harry and gave him a quick hug too. "Congratulations, you two." Then she laughed softly. "Something else for Ron to find out."

"Please don't tell him. I plan to do so tomorrow morning."

"Will it be somewhere I can see?" Hermione asked mischievously.

"Be in the common room after breakfast. You can sit with Harry and keep him from hexing my brother," Ginny told her with a grin.

"I won't miss it. If you'll excuse me, I'd best be going before anyone comes down." With a smile, Hermione turned and left the Tower.

Harry whispered to Ginny. "You would be prettier than her if you were going to the Ball."

Her eyes sparkled as she turned to him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Then she grabbed his hand and pulled him back to the table. They had an act to maintain for a little while longer.

After breakfast the next morning, Ginny was not sure about talking to Ron at this exact moment, but she wanted it done. The problem was Ron was still in a foul mood from last night. He had returned from the Ball in a temper and then waited in the common room staring at the portrait hole. She and Harry had sat on the side of the room softly talking. Ron had never noticed them, or anyone else for that matter. When Hermione had come in much later, the fireworks started. To say those two had a flaming row would be an understatement. Ginny was surprised a teacher had not come in, since they were shouting so loud. Hermione ended it by going up to her dorm just about the time that she and Harry thought they were going to have to step in and break the fight up.

While they walked, she looked at Ron and his scowl; yep, he was in a full-blown snit. When they reached the common room after breakfast, Ginny told him, "Ron, come with me for a minute, I need to tell you something." He looked like he was going to balk, but then he followed her. When she sat down, she noticed that Harry and Hermione were on the other side of the room with a chess set between them. It looked so natural; she was sure that was Hermione's idea.

"Ron..."

"Ginny, I don't want to hear it. I know you're going to take Hermione's side."

She wanted to say that Hermione had a very valid point that Ron should have asked her sooner if he cared who she went with, but this was really not the time to try and straighten him out on that. "Ron, I have nothing to say about that at this time."

He looked surprised. "Oh?"

"Ron, I need to talk to you about something else. About ... Harry and me."

His hackles seemed to go up at that. "What's he done to you?" He looked daggers at the boy across the room.

"Well, he very politely, mind you, asked me to be his girlfriend, and I accepted."

"Ginny!" he exploded.

She whipped out her wand. "Ronald Weasley, shut it!" she commanded him, and to his credit he obeyed.

"Now you listen to me very closely. I've seen you watching us since practically the first day you met him, so you should know that he's always been a good friend to me. And just for your information, not once has he ever been anything less than a perfect gentleman. In fact, I practically had to ask him first..."

"You what?" Ron looked very confused.

"I said, shut it! I'm telling you this now so you aren't surprised later when we hold hands, or kiss good-night, or anything else boyfriends and girlfriends do. I'm warning you, Ron, leave us alone. You do not want to mess with me or Harry. And if you do try, I'll get the twins involved to so it's four on one. Do you understand me?" One of the great things about being in a large family was if you needed help and knew how to play your cards, you could always gang up on the sibling who was being "stupid" and get your way. Ginny was a master at it rivaled only by the twins. Even Bill understood and respected her.

Ron paled and swallowed hard.

"I love you, Ron, but you will not bother Harry or myself, nor will you fight our relationship, get in the way, or do anything to attempt to break us up. If you try that, I won't hesitate to go to Mum either. Do you fancy a war where it's five on one?"

He vigorously shook his head.

Satisfied he was sufficiently cowed, she put her arms around his shoulders and gave him a quick hug, just like she used to do for

Harry. "I love you Ron, so I shall give you some advice to consider. Think very carefully before you speak and act, and you'll have more friends and less trouble." With that, she got up and walked over to her boyfriend, whom she had noticed had been giving her glances. Smiling, she sat sideways on his lap as he finished his chess game, narrowly losing to Hermione. Looking over, she saw Ron looking at her and he appeared to be thinking deeply. She smiled at him and he gave her a very weak smile back.

As the year continued, the twins were happy for Ginny, treating her and Harry no differently. Ginny's talk had caused Ron to continue his policy of keeping a distance while also keeping watch. He bristled when she and Harry kissed good-night, but he did not interfere.

In Harry's family, his brother Cedric was still dating his Yule Ball date, the pretty asian girl, Cho Chang. When Cedric found out Ginny was now officially Harry's girlfriend, he had gotten a large grin on his face and pulled Harry into a hug and slapped him on the back, telling him, "You lucky devil!" Cedric also told Ginny "Congratulations!" Harry was very happy Cedric was his brother.

The second task drastically changed the standings in the tournament. Cedric moved into first place by a narrow margin, leading Viktor, and then Fleur. The French witch had lost a lot of points by not completing the second task.

Harry shuddered when Hermione was brought out of the lake by Krum. His concern was not only for his friend who had been at the bottom of the lake, but it was also for who they would have taken for him to rescue. He was almost certain it would have been the pretty redhaired witch sitting next to him.

The third task started as the term was ending. Harry watched his brother run into the maze. From what his brother had told him, Harry was very happy not to be competing. Just before the hour mark, fireworks went off, originating from the middle of the maze and the hedges that made up the walls started to slowly disappear. A minute or so later, everyone could see Cedric standing in the middle holding up the Triwizard Trophy Cup. With Ginny's hand in his, he sprinted down onto the field right behind his parents to congratulate his

brother, Cho was right behind them. Cedric was happy and Harry was happy for him.

After the fake Moody had been discovered, Harry decided this had been a pretty good year. He had won a hundred Galleons by having a little fun playing games, gotten a wonderful girlfriend, and learned a lot. While the fake Moody had been a pretty good teacher, the real Moody had been better.

The summer promised to be good too. He should get a lot of time to see Ginny; Professor Flitwick would continue to teach them over the summer, or Professor McGonagall would when the Charms professor was unavailable; and he was supposed to start visiting his godfather, Sirius. He had discovered that Sirius had a very funny sense of humor, or at least he did in his letters.

Presently, the plan was to spend Saturdays and the occasional morning over at Sirius's house. Former Professor Lupin was supposed to be around as well. Now all he needed to do was to arrange for Ginny to come with him. If he got really lucky, he would get Sirius to take him shopping so he could use his tournament winnings and some of his own money to buy a Firebolt. Yes, this summer looked like it would be quite good.

(A/N: Four parts down and 5 parts left...)

“Year 4”

The Headmistress walked to the Defense classroom. Other than passing two ghosts, it had been a quiet walk; then again, it was summer. Walking into the classroom, as expected, she found her strongest supporter getting ready for his usual afternoon session. She nodded with her greeting. “Filius.”

“Minerva. I'm surprised to see you here. I thought you were inspecting Sirius Black's house.”

She sat at a student's desk. “I've just returned. I think it is safe enough for Harry and any friends he wants to accompany him. Sirius has removed all of the Dark Objects that I could find except for one, which Albus removed. It was another Horcrux.”

“No!” he squeaked in surprise.

“I'm sorry to say that I am not. To make matters worse, when Albus came to take it away, he told me that he had found one other, a ring, not long ago and his research indicates there should still be three more.” She shook her head in amazement at the ugly thought.

“How did he destroy them? I hadn't heard.”

McGonagall smiled. “Believe it or not, he took an international Portkey to a place called Hawaii and rode a broom near a volcano and threw them in such that they melted in the lava.”

Flitwick cocked his head at her. “You're serious, aren't you?”

“That's what he said.” Then she gave a short chuckle. “He also said he then spent a week there enjoying the beach saying it was a nice vacation spot.”

“Speaking of vacations, Minerva, I plan to take the two weeks off starting next week to go visit my family...”

She nodded. "I can do those weeks; then I have some traveling to do when you return. I need to find a new Defense teacher, as Moody has resigned and I have no applicants. I now understand the troubles Albus had in finding qualified candidates."

"What do you plan to do if you can't find one? Can we get another Auror from Director Scrimgeour?"

"I'm afraid not," she told him with despair in her voice. "Albus also told me that strange things have been happening at the Ministry. Apparently, Auror Dawlish has disappeared and they think he was ambushed by Death Eaters, but they can't find a body. Albus also said that he's worried that Voldemort used Dawlish to regain a body and will now make an attempt to retrieve the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries."

"Unfortunate and interesting," the little man replied. "I'm glad Albus is there taking care of that; he can be more focused than if he was still Headmaster."

"True."

"I'm glad you insisted on that, Minerva," he praised her and she nodded her thanks. "So, Sirius is ready for Harry to visit, shall I tell him that?"

McGonagall nodded. "Yes. He's not to have a set schedule of days to help with safety, and he can go up to three times a week on whatever mornings or weekend days he wants, as long as his parents approve. Remus Lupin recently moved in and will be there most of the time as well."

Flitwick nodded committing it all to memory to be passed along. "Sirius still doesn't have a job, does he?"

Minerva snorted. "Actually, he does have a part-time one."

"Oh?"

“Believe it or not, when the Weasley twins accidentally ran into Sirius, they convinced him to be the financial backer for a joke shop they are starting.”

“What?” he squeaked as he smiled at the thought.

“Apparently, they've given some of their inventions to Sirius, and he's going to sell them from a cart in Diagon Alley over the summer and in Hogsmeade when our students have a visiting day.” Minerva was now smiling too. “It's amusing to think about those kindred spirits getting together, isn't it?”

“He told you all of this when you visited today?”

The Headmistress nodded. “It's a bit hard to believe, but it does sound in character for him. I think it will do him good.” As she was about to go on, they heard running feet and looked at the door. Harry and Ginny came running through it.

“Hello, Professors!” Harry greeted them, with Ginny echoing him.

“Good afternoon, Harry, Ginny,” the Headmistress returned as she stood. “Have a good lesson today. I shall take over lessons for a couple weeks starting next week.” They told her good-bye as she started walking out.

As she got to the doorway, she heard her colleague say, “Today we are going to start soundless casting...”

Harry and Ginny sat in the Defense classroom for their last class of the first day of their fourth year. They wondered what it would be like, especially since they heard some bad things about their new teacher. Rumor had it that the Headmistress had been unable to find a teacher, so the Ministry had supplied one, and it was not an Auror. Apparently she was some bureaucrat that had formerly been a Senior Undersecretary under Fudge before she had been demoted. It did not sound promising.

Of course, both Harry and Ginny had no fear of failing the class. They were so far ahead of their peers in this class thanks to all the work with Professor Flitwick they really did not even have to study. So

because of the rumors and their lack of need to pay attention in class, they sat at the back and waited with the rest of the fourth year Gryffindors and the Ravensclaws.

As the bell rang to start class, the witch introduced at the Welcoming Feast walked in and closed the door behind her. Pulling out her wand, she shot a spell at the blackboard that wrote her name. "Good afternoon class, I'm Professor Umbridge. Put your wands away, you only need your books and supplies for taking notes. In fact, that's all you will need in this class this year as we will be learning in a safe and friendly environment."

Harry looked at Ginny with a quizzical look on his face and found she had one too. Deciding he needed clarification, he raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr ...?" the witch in the fuzzy pink sweater called on him.

"Potter. We won't do any spell work in class?"

"No, Mr Potter, there is no need to. Should there be a real problem, you can always call the Ministry to send out an Auror," she told him in a sweetly condescending voice.

Harry wondered where Aurors came from if they did not get a decent background in Defense at Hogwarts, but he kept that to himself. He had a more pressing question. "But, Professor, if you meet a Death Eater face to face, there isn't time to call the Ministry..."

"Mr Potter!" she interrupted him. Her voice was now firm. "You will not run into any Death Eaters, they are all in prison."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I fought a Death Eater here in school last year, and he was firing spells like crazy at the time," Harry told her adamantly.

"Detention, Mr Potter, for lying!"

"And professor, I heard an Auror is missing and the other Aurors believe Death Eaters kidnapped him from his home, so..."

“Shut up! It is all untrue! The Ministry has everything under control!” She was practically frothing at the mouth now. “Come here and take this to your head-of-house.” As he gathered his things, she wrote a short note and gave it to him when he got up there.

Turning around, Harry saw a lot of sympathetic looks from his classmates as well as a look of intense anger from Ginny. He put his finger to his lips to keep her quiet as he walked away from the vile teacher behind him. At the moment, he was trying to figure out what he was going to do to her; then, he corrected himself and thought “we”, as he knew Ginny would want in on it too.

Leaving the room, Harry went to Professor Washburn's office and found it empty, so he headed to her class. She was teaching the fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins at the moment. She went silent as he interrupted her class to give her the note. She read it and conjured a chair on side of the room and pointed to it, not saying a word to him. After he sat down, she resumed her class.

Looking around, he saw Hermione, Ron, and the rest of the Gryffindors looking at him, obviously wondering why he was there. He was too, or at least he was wondering what was in the note; but he had a little under an hour to wait and find out. Not having anything else to do, he paid attention to the lesson, which was on turning small vertebrates into larger vertebrates of a different species. When the practical portion of the class came, he asked Parvati, who was handing out the moles to every student, if he could have one too, and she gave him one.

To everyone's surprise, especially Hermione's, he was the first one in the class to turn his mole into a dog. As he admired the result, he realized he had a perfect replica of his godfather's Animagus form. At Hermione's gasp at his success, he noticed Professor Washburn looking at him with curiosity, but she still did not say anything to him. Not sure what else to do, he turned the dog back into a mole and put it back into the basket Parvati had pulled the small animals from. For the last few minutes of class, he helped Neville, who was sitting nearby. When the bell rang to end class, Neville was closer, but he still had work to do before he was successful.

When the classroom was empty of all the fifth years, Professor Washburn turned to Harry. "Mr Potter? Will you please explain why Professor Umbridge thought you were such distraction to her class she sent you to me and gave you two weeks of detention?"

"Two weeks?!" he shouted.

"Do not take that tone with me, Mr Potter, or I shall increase that time," she told him crossly. "And yes, two weeks; now explain."

Harry closed his eyes and took a few seconds to try to regain his composure. With forced calmness, he described what had happened in his class. When he finished, she stared at him for minute, her expression showing her to be in deep thought.

She returned to the conversation with sad look on her face. "Unfortunately, I can't really do anything about this as it was in her classroom." As he started to protest, she held up her hand to stop him. "Your argument was well made, but you are fighting a small-minded person who views herself as the mouthpiece of a very powerful political faction at the ministry. As happy as I am with Minister Bones herself, there are still a lot of corrupt people in the Ministry and the Minister can not get rid of all of them overnight; that is reality. You will keep this to yourself, but the Headmistress is working to correct the situation, but even she has her hands tied at times."

Very quietly, he asked, "So there's nothing I can do about this?"

"Other than keeping your head down and staying out of trouble? No, Mr Potter, I'm afraid that the only thing you can do is to tell your friends to behave themselves too, and to stay out of that woman's way for now. That will help you as things will probably get worse before they get better." Washburn looked very apologetic as she told him, "I'm really very sorry, Mr Potter, truly I am. I'll try to speed things up where I can. Now, take ten points for Gryffindor for the nice transfiguration work I saw you do and head off to dinner. Do not be late or do anything else to antagonize that woman. Understood?"

"Yes, Professor," he said dejectedly and left for the Great Hall.

Harry was seething. He was also starting a mental list of possible vile things to do to Umbridge, regardless of what they took to accomplish. He had just spent two hours with the evil woman and the back of his right hand was killing him. Part of him was not sure he could keep this up for nine more detentions, but he would find a way. This was now a personal war.

Entering the Gryffindor Tower, he saw Ginny and his friends doing homework; Hermione was with them. Ginny looked at him and instantly rose and pulled him into a hug just before he got to their table. By the look on her face, he could tell that he had not hid his emotions well enough. Hermione looked very concerned too.

"What's wrong?" his girlfriend asked still holding him in a loose embrace.

"She's an evil woman!" he hissed.

"What did she make you do?"

"Write lines..." He decided he needed to stop there. He did not really want to tell Ginny exactly what happened. Harry wasn't totally sure why, maybe because the war seemed so personal and he wanted to spare her.

"And what's so bad about that?" Hermione continued to listen to Ginny's questions with obvious curiosity.

After a pause, Harry finally grumbled, "Nothing. I don't want to talk about it."

"Harry!" she had a tone of warning in her voice and her look would have caused most boys to fail.

"Ginny, please let it go. I'll tell you later, I just don't want to talk about it now." He hoped later would never come.

She evaluated him by staring deep into his eyes. After a long moment, she gave up. Harry was not sure what she had found or determined as she had not said anything. She slid her right hand down his arm

and grabbed his right hand to lead him back to the table. When she did that, she rubbed her fingers across the back of his very sore hand. He could not stop the hiss that came out.

"What?" she swung back around and asked him, suspicion in her eyes.

"Nothing," he said through clenched teeth.

"Harry, that's not nothing. What is it?" she asked him in a way that let him know he better answer if he knew what was good for him. She also happened to shift her hand again and he involuntarily let out another hiss. She must have figured something out because she saw her lift up his hand and look at it. The second she saw the dark redness on the back of his hand, anger lit up her face. "Tell me what happened, and don't lie to me!"

He could not escape her now. "Ginny, it's between me and her, and I'm going to beat her." He was having to work hard to talk, his hand hurt so much.

She hissed back. "Harry, don't be stubborn! Let me help you. What did she do to cause this?" Hermione stood up and came over to look, gasping and raising hand to her mouth in surprise when she saw the back of his hand.

"I told you, I had to write lines..." Ginny's look made him go on. "She had this quill that didn't use ink, and when I wrote with it, it wrote with blood, my blood, and it also scratched what I wrote onto the back of my hand too." He was not happy having to say that, but he managed to not say anything else that would take his anger out on her -- it was not her fault.

"She used a Blood Quill on you?" Hermione asked. Harry shrugged, he did not know what it was called. "Harry, those are illegal to use except for signing a magical contract. She, she, tortured you." Hermione looked like her pet had just been killed she was so upset.

"Harry, we're going to go talk to the Headmistress about this," Ginny told him in no uncertain terms.

"Ginny, I told you, this is my battle with that woman. I'm going to win it my way."

His girlfriend stared at him so intensely it was all he could do not to step away from her. "Why are you being so stubborn? Let me help you."

It was obvious he was on dangerous ground with her. Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place. "Fine. I'm not going to go talk to McGonagall, but you can help me plan something to get back at Umbridge. I want to do this my way."

"Even if it's wrong?" Ginny's voice was flat and dangerous. "Even if it means ignoring your best friend?"

That hurt, that really hurt. He did the only thing he could, ignore it. Stepping up and pulling her to him, he whispered in her ear. "Please, Ginny?" She was very stiff in his arms.

Relaxing a little, she kissed him on his cheek before she stepped back away from him. "I'll think about it." With that, she picked up her things and went up the stairs to her dorm.

Harry watched her walk away and just stood there staring at nothing for a minute. He could tell that he had not lost her, but he knew he had made her very mad at him. "Have I just messed up and turned into the world's biggest prat?" Harry mumbled to himself, but someone heard him.

"Yes."

He looked to the side and saw Hermione staring at him with a disappointed look on her face. Harry ignored his homework and went to bed; he had had more than enough for that day.

The next day, Ginny was there for him, but slightly cool. He noticed her giving him looks, as if she was studying him. He supposed she was still thinking about his little battle with the evil toad woman and this was her way of sticking by him but telling him she disapproved of

his decision. That forced him to think about his decision and her all day long.

As he finished dinner, just before he was about to go the detention with Umbridge again, Harry screwed up his courage before he leaned over to whisper to her. "You're right, I admit it. Something needs to be done and I should let you help me any way you want." The stubborn part of him hated to admit that, but he had finally decided he cared more about her than his personal little war. He probably should not have been surprised by her large smile, but he was. "Let's sit down together and plan something later tonight, OK?"

Ginny got an impish grin on her face and leaned forward and gently kissed his cheek. "Until later, and I'm glad you came to your senses. You'll always need my help."

He chuckled at her sense of humor. "You're probably right. Later..." He briefly kissed her and then left, glad they were not fighting anymore.

Slowly he walked to his detention. He had a few extra minutes, so there was no hurry. The first thing that crossed his mind for the toad woman was to break into her office one night and burn all of her quills. He would bet she locked her office, but then he thought he could get Fred and George to help, and he was sure they could get in even if he could not.

Arriving right at seven, he knocked. He had barely put his hand down when the door opened. "Mr Potter, how kind of you to come," she told him in her sickly sweet voice. Looking over, he saw parchment and that quill waiting for him. "Time for some more lines of 'I will not tell lies'. Do get started. I'll stop you when I think the message has sunk in." She finished with an evil chuckle.

He slowly took his seat and picked up the quill. By force of will, he started writing his lines. As he finished the fourth one, a knock on the door startled him. Umbridge looked at him and said in a quiet, quick, and forceful tone. "Give me that quill now!" Harry stared at her and wondered what would happen if he showed the quill to whomever

was on the other side of the door, as that was obviously her concern, now that he know what this quill was.

She pulled her wand out and pointed it at him, "I said..."

But she never got to finish as the door flew open and Ginny followed by the Headmistress walked in. Ginny had a triumphant look on her face, while the Headmistress wore her usual stern look, which became much more severe as she took in the scene in her Defense teacher's office.

Pulling out her wand too, McGonagall told the other woman. "Delores, I would strongly advise you to slowly point your wand a different direction and then put it down on the desk." Harry saw Ginny pull her wand out and point it at Umbridge too. Umbridge finally complied. "Miss Weasley, please pick up her wand and hold it for me." McGonagall sounded calm, but there was no mistaking the look on her face.

When Ginny had Umbridge's wand, McGonagall looked at Harry. "Mr Potter, please show me the back of your right hand." He did. Her lips stretched and almost disappeared in her anger. "Please use the fireplace and Floo call Professor Flitwick. Ask him to come to this office. Try 'Flitwick's Quarters' first."

A few minutes later, Flitwick showed up and became outraged when he found out what Umbridge had done. He stuck his head in the Floo for a conversation and nearly ten minutes later, two Aurors, Director Scrimgeour, and Minister Bones walked into the room. The conversation was very heated and Umbridge was cowering in the corner, while under the watch of the two Aurors. Harry found it all very amusing considering what she had done to him. Looking at Ginny, he saw a very satisfied smirk on her face.

It seemed that when a Defense teacher could not be found, the job of finding someone had been delegated to the Director, who had delegated it again, until eventually the job had fallen to the Office of Improper Use of Magic, and to Umbridge specifically, because no one else had wanted to do it. Once the choice had been made, it appeared that no one thought to tell anyone above them, so neither

the Director nor the Minister had known who had been selected to come teach. It was bureaucracy at its finest.

Finally, a picture was taken of Harry's very red and slightly cut hand before Umbridge was placed in manacles and then taken away by the Aurors. The Blood Quill also went as evidence. Minister Bones turned to Harry. "Mr Potter, on behalf of the Ministry, I'd like to apologize to you for this happening. In addition to some form of restitution, I can promise you that that witch will not spend less than five years in Azkaban. Using a torture device on an underage wizard carries a harsh penalty. I can also promise you that an Auror will be assigned to finish out the year here."

Harry nodded his head slightly. "Thank you, Minister. I accept the Ministry's apology; however, I think the Ministry also needs to apologize to the rest of the school for her being here. They had to endure her too, even if they did not suffer the same way I did."

"A valid point," the Minister agreed. She turned to her companion. "Director, you will be here tomorrow during breakfast and give the entire population here an apology similar to what I just gave Mr Potter." Despite the sour look on his face, the Director nodded.

"Headmistress, I assume you will take Mr Potter to see the school nurse?"

"I will, Minister."

"Very good. I believe we are done here. Minerva, I'm sincerely sorry for what has been inflicted on you. Fortunately for all, her tenure here was short and she will not be bothering this school again. Good evening." The Minister nodded to all the Hogwarts residents and left; Scrimgeour left with her.

Professor McGonagall led him to the hospital wing; Ginny held his uninjured hand and went with him. After giving him a special salve, which he was to use for the next couple of days, Madam Pomfrey told him it would heal completely and sent him on his way.

The Headmistress seemed to be in a good mood as she led them back towards Gryffindor Tower. At the bottom of the steps, she looked at them. "Miss Weasley, I thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. I am delighted to see that woman go. Mr Potter, I too am very sorry this happened to you. As for the detentions that you were given for your behavior in class, I will transfer the supervision of them to Miss Weasley." The barest of smiles came to her. "I'm sure she will take care of your behavior problems for the next two weeks."

A very happy grin came over Ginny. "Thank you, Professor. I shall take care of Mr Potter for you." She grabbed Harry's uninjured hand and pulled him up the stairs towards the Tower. She planned to find a cushiony chair and sit on Harry's lap for the next few hours to make sure he rested.

The next day, a middle-aged wizard named Stockman showed up to teach Defense for the rest of the year. Harry learned a lot from him. When the year ended, Harry thought it could not have gone much better once "toad woman" had been taken away.

On the more fun side of life, Harry heard from his godfather that his little job had been going so well that the Weasley twins would be opening up a permanent shop over the summer. Sirius would stay on and continue to help, as well as run the sales cart in Hogsmeade.

Also, letters from his brother indicated that he was still trying to date Cho Chang, who was finishing her sixth year in Ravenclaw, despite the fact that Cedric was now out of school and she was still in school. Since his job as an assistant manager of the Arrows stadium was going well, Harry thought he was sure to get to see a few professional Quidditch matches for free over the summer. Ignoring a certain evil wizard, life looked pretty good.

If Harry had asked Albus Dumbledore, he would have found that the old wizard did not agree as it was not so easy for the older wizard to ignore that certain evil wizard.

As June ended, so did the perceived peace in the Wizarding world. Dumbledore's concern became reality. Alarms that he had set up in the Ministry of Magic went off a little after midnight, alerting many people. By the time Aurors Apparated into the building, there were

Death Eaters leaving via the fireplaces. Although over a dozen Aurors were there, not a single Death Eater was captured due to them being surprised and then attacked by a resurrected Lord Voldemort.

By the time Dumbledore had arrived at the Ministry, it was back under control of the Aurors as the Dark Lord had left less than a minute before. Unfortunately, he had not been at home and therefore had not heard the alarm. Dumbledore calmly went down to the Department of Mysteries to inspect the Hall of Prophecies to see if Voldemort had made it down there or not. On row ninety-seven, he found a huge scorch mark on the shelf where a very special prophecy had resided. He chuckled to himself and wondered what Tom Riddle had thought when he picked up the glass orb and saw it turn into a note telling him that he was too late and that the prophecy he wanted had been destroyed.

With a smile on his face, he went back up to the atrium so he could return to his home. As he walked through the halls, he idly thought about the favor Minerva had done for him by sending him away from Hogwarts. He still had fond memories about those hallowed halls, but this way, he had so much more time for all the little projects he needed to do. In fact, he had recently completed another one of those little projects, one involving a very old cup. He only had two left and he was starting to think that one was at the school. Since he was not supposed to go there, he considered handing that project off to Harry. The boy might enjoy a little adventure at school.

As for the other, well, he needed to go see someone tomorrow. Albus Dumbledore walked away from where he knew the Diggory home should be, feeling much better about the safety of young Mr Potter. When he had had this idea, his magic seemed to compel him to do it. It was from his Unbreakable Vow to work for Harry's good he knew. Now, their house was completely hidden under a Fidelius Charm, with Amos as the secret keeper.

That done, he Apparated to Diagon Alley, where he walked down the street until he came to number ninety-three, and where he found redheaded twins painting a building front in garish colors. "Mr and Mr Weasley," he said pleasantly with a twinkle in his eye.

They looked up. "Professor!" they exclaimed in unison.

"Now, now, I'm no longer a professor. I believe Albus will do. So the rumor is true; you have a store here."

"Yes, sir."

"A permanent store."

"Congratulations," he told them amicably. "I'm looking for your business partner. Might I find him here?"

"Certainly, he's inside..."

"Go on in."

He nodded. "Thank you, and carry on with your excellent paint job." They laughed at him as he went in. Inside, he found the many shelves were about half full. He guessed they would be opening soon. Hearing a noise from the back, he walked that way.

"Sirius?" he called out, not wanting to surprise the man. That might cause him to get hexed, or for a charm or potion to go bad -- none of which were desirable.

A head poked up from behind a counter. "Albus?" It was a questioning tone. While not friendly, at least it was not unfriendly. He knew he was not on the younger man's list of favorite people after he had not stood up for the young man and forced a trial those many years ago.

"Ah, Sirius, there you are. How are you this fine day?"

"Well enough. What can I do for you, Albus?" The tone was still fairly flat, as was the younger man's smile.

Albus tried to be friendly anyway, as you could always catch more flies with Butterbeer than bubotuber pus. "Sirius, I'm in search for an object and I thought you might be able to help me find it."

“Oh?”

“Yes, you see, I'm in search of a fairly large golden cloak clasp with a large ruby on it. It has the same problem that the locket we found in your house did. I believe that a Death Eater in your extended family had it at one time. I'm hoping it is still where it was before she got married.”

“Bellatrix...” Sirius whispered, his face showing him to be momentarily lost in old memories.

After a long moment where Sirius said nothing, Albus continued. “Yes, I was searching for this clasp and I found an old letter from your cousin that stated that she had it just after she finished school. As we did not find it at your house like we did the locket, I was wondering if you have perchance seen it in your family vault?”

Slowly, Sirius's attention returned. “It is possible. There are a lot of things in there, some of which I'm unaware of.”

A hope of victory came over the old man. “Would it be possible for me to accompany you to your family vault to search for this item?”

Sirius looked at him thinking it through. “Is it really that dangerous?”

“Very,” he said solemnly. “Its capture would also be a major blow to Voldemort.”

“I'll be done in about an hour,” the younger man finally said.

“Very well, I shall return in an hour to accompany you to retrieve it. It shouldn't take but a few minutes. Is that acceptable?” Sirius nodded. “Excellent, I shall return soon.”

Albus left to go to Gringotts to pick up some traveling money, especially some US dollars. With an old ring, a cup, and hopefully a clasp very soon, it was time to travel back to Hawaii. He would go after he had a short conversation with Minerva to talk about the last hurdle.

“Year 5”

Harry and Ginny spent the summer before their fifth year like they had the last three summers. To their amazement, on their first free day, which Harry spent over at the Weasleys, Fred and George came up to the young couple with the barest of smiles on their faces. They looked serious, at least to someone who did not know them well.

Ginny looked at them very carefully, her eyes narrowing as she tried to figure out what they were up to. "What do you two want?" She and Harry had been drawing in the living room. Alternating turns, each had half a minute to add something to the picture. While Ginny could draw reasonably well, Harry's additions made the picture unrecognizable -- although hilarious.

"Follow us," Fred said softly.

When neither of the two youngsters moved, George added, "It will be to your benefit."

Harry looked at Ginny and raised an eyebrow at the twin's uncharacteristic solemnity; she just shrugged and stood. Harry stood as well and the two followed the older boys out of the house. A moment later, they were behind their father's shed.

George pulled an old piece of parchment out from an inside pocket. "We bequeath to you, our sister..."

"And our like-a-brother..." Fred added.

"This piece of history..."

"Not to mention the secret to many of our pranking successes."

"Since we will no longer be at Hogwarts..."

"We are counting on you to uphold the tradition."

George handed the old parchment over to his sister. "Pull out your wand and touch it to the parchment while saying..."

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

Harry pulled out his wand and followed the command. As soon as he finished saying the special phrase, words magically appeared on parchment. "Messers Moony, Padfoot, Prongs, and Wormtail welcome you to the Marauder's Map." Lines started drawing themselves and in a few seconds, it was obvious what they showed.

"That's Hogwarts!" Ginny exclaimed.

"Right you are dear sister..."

"And if you will continue to unfold it, you'll see a map of the whole school and most of the grounds."

"Dad..." Harry finally said reverently. "I finally have something else from my dad."

"What are you talking about, Harry?" Ginny asked him, very confused by his quietness and then his pronouncement.

"My dad helped make this. He was Prongs." He was still in awe as he stared at the map.

"You mean to say that your father did this?" George was taken aback.

"I wonder who the others were?" Fred asked with much curiosity.

Harry started laughing and pointing at the twins. Ginny joined him half-heartedly, his laugh was so infectious, but she did not know what the big deal was. The twins were at a loss.

"What?"

"Yeah, tell us," the other twin demanded.

When Harry got his breath back, he finally explained. "You've already met them all, but you just ever knew it. Padfoot is your business partner."

"What, Sirius?" Harry nodded to Fred.

"That old dog fooled us!" George was beside himself with glee.

"And the others?" Ginny asked, not to be left out of the conversation.

"Moony is Professor Remus Lupin."

"No way!"

"Oh, shut up, he can't be!"

Harry nodded vigorously before a slightly angry look came over him.
"And Wormtail used to live here with you."

"Peter..."

"...Petigrew." Each twin had spit out the name.

"That's all really unbelievable, Harry," Ginny finally commented into the silence after the mention of the traitor, "sort of like you suddenly getting something from your father." He smiled at her and his own good fortune. She gave him a quick one-armed hug to show him she was really happy for him. "So," she looked at the twins, "what all will this thing do?"

The twins spent the next ten minutes explaining the map, showing the secret places, and even how people showed up on the map. The Headmistress was in her office and the map showed her pacing around. The last thing they showed Harry and Ginny was the phrase to turn it off.

Fred started wrapping their time up. "Besides the fact that you two are our favorite siblings..."

"We feel you can use this the most, and are most likely to live up to our tradition."

"It is sad," the first twin lamented.

"But poor Ronnikins just isn't cut out for this."

"So do us proud!" Fred stuck his arm up in the air and assumed a ridiculous pose.

"And prank 'em all -- especially the Slytherins!" George put one arm around his twin's waist, while other hand came out and settled on his own hip as his nose went up in the air. The two together stood like a statue proud they had conquered something.

"Thanks!" Harry simply said, while trying to hold his laughter in at the strange sight.

"We'll try to be worthy," Ginny said with an impish smile on her face.

The twins sprung apart. "And we can't ask for anything more, can we Bro?"

"Well, we do want stories," the other answered.

"Oh yes, definitely stories..."

"Pink Slytherins are my favorite," George quipped as he started walking off.

Fred followed. "Those are nice, but what about psychedelic Slytherins?"

"Only if they blink..." the voice got quieter as George walked away.

"Blinking is fun, but do you think we could do slow pulsing? You know I think that would be possible. Maybe we should try it on our business partner for not telling us about himself..." the voices faded away.

Harry looked at Ginny. "You know, this does present us with some fun possibilities."

Ginny grinned back and started leading him back into the house. "Yes it does, Mr Potter; yes it does."

After a week off just to relax and to let their teachers have some time to unwind, the young couple took the Floo to the castle to start their normal summer lessons. When they arrived, they found both Professors Flitwick and McGonagall waiting on them.

"Mr Potter, Miss Weasley, are you still enjoying these extra classes?" The Headmistress sounded very calm and casual.

Harry did not think she really was, though; that did not sound like an every day question despite the words. "Yes, Professor. Not only is it a lot of fun to learn magic with just a few of us, but it makes our school work much easier during the year." Ginny nodded vigorously in her agreement.

"That's good. If you remember back to when we started this, I told you that you would have extra lessons to help keep you safe." Harry nodded. "Professor Flitwick and I think it's time we told you a little more." She looked at the girl now. "Ginny, I'm not sure I should tell you this too, but I suspect that even if I don't, you'll know five minutes later anyway." She blushed a bit while Harry smiled.

"As your parents have told you," McGonagall started, "there was an accident when you were a little more than one year old. A man named Voldemort, or You-Know-Who, tried to kill you. While you lived, your parents died that night."

"That's how I got the scar on my forehead, isn't it?"

"Yes, Harry. After that, you were taken to live with your mother's sister and her family. However, that did not go very well and there was another accident, but you lost your memories because of it." Harry was nodding, having heard most of this from his mother before. "Because of the accident, Professor Flitwick and I stepped in and helped you to recover and placed you with the Diggorys. This is also why we are taking responsibility for your extra lessons."

"I see," he drawled, taking in this last bit of new information. He had wondered why the professors took such an interest in him.

"The reason you need to know how to protect yourself more than most students is that You-Know-Who still wants to kill you. Unfortunately, there was a prophecy made around the time you were born that stated that you would be able to kill You-Know-Who, and he did not like that."

"So I have to kill him?" Harry was a bit confused, obviously trying to understand it all.

McGonagall sighed. "I'm sorry to say this, but it would seem so. He believes in the prophecy, and will not stop until one of you is dead, so ... yes, you must learn how to protect yourself and how to take care of him. Unfortunately, he can kill you too, so you must always be ready for him. This is why you've been given extra training. Do you understand?"

"I suppose. I don't really want to kill anyone though," Harry said sadly as he closed his eyes and lowered his head in thought. Ginny put an arm around his shoulders to comfort him and he leaned into her.

"I wish you didn't have to as well, Harry. No one should have to do that. Fortunately, you don't have to do it immediately. You see, there is one task that has to be done first, and you and Ginny can work on it together if you like. In fact, it would be best if you could do it this summer."

"What's that?" Ginny asked.

"You remember the diary that you were given, which we had to destroy?" Both students nodded. "There is one more item like that left which we must find. Once we destroy that, You-Know-Who will be mortal and can be killed. Until then, no one can kill him, not even you, Harry. So you see, the sooner this item can be found, the better for everyone."

"What is this item?" Ginny had taken over as Harry looked down and seemed to be having to work through the earlier news. She was rubbing his back trying to make him feel better.

"We believe it is a blue jewel about the size of an egg, and it's probably embedded in a diadem. We also believe it to be hidden somewhere here in the castle. However, we just don't know where," she said with resignation.

Silence reigned for a few moments. Sensing there was not much else to say on this topic at this time, McGonagall reached behind her and picked up a small package and handed it to Harry. "Harry, while I would really prefer to hold onto this until you leave school at the end of your seventh year, for your safety, I shall give this to you now."

Harry opened the bag and pulled out a large piece of silvery shimmering cloth that was incredibly soft. Laying it over his arm, he saw his arm disappear. He gasped.

"Yes, Harry, it is an Invisibility Cloak. It was actually your father's. While your father might have given it to you earlier, I strongly suspect your mother would not have given it to you while you were still at school. This seemed like a reasonable compromise to me."

Harry draped it around his shoulders and everything but his head disappeared. He saw Ginny smile and it was not hard to guess what she was thinking.

"I will warn you, Mr Potter." He looked up at the use of his formal name and saw a very stern look. "I know spells that allow me to see people in Invisibility Cloaks. If I catch you abusing the rules with that cloak, I will take it back from you until you finish school. Do I make myself very clear?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Harry quickly agreed.

"Very well, if something bad should happen, use the cloak to disappear and immediately go somewhere safe." Harry nodded at his understanding. "That's all I have then. I believe it's time for your lessons to continue." The Headmistress gracefully stood and left the room.

Flitwick took over for the rest of the day. "As you can guess, revealing charms will be very important to you this summer. I'll spend the first

week teaching you how to find secret places, reveal traps, and other charms you'll need in your search, then we'll only meet to learn three times a week. The rest of your time can be searching. You can even come here in the morning if your parents allow you." Ginny nodded as did Harry, although Harry's was very half-hearted, the earlier news still in the forefront of his mind..

True to his word, Professor Flitwick taught them nearly a dozen spells to help them in their search, and then helped them search a few rooms as they tested their training. The other three house common rooms were among the first they searched, since it was easier to get in with a teacher escorting them. Despite them spending most of their summer at Hogwarts, they had not found the missing Horcrux by the time school started. It was the most frustrating time that Harry could remember in his life. They had, however, found some truly lovely places to snog that they had never seen before.

On the train back to school, their ride to start to start their fifth year was like none before it, because Harry and Ginny were the Gryffindor fifth year prefects. Along with Hermione and Ron, the four went to the front of the train for the prefect meeting. Harry found out why Ron had griped about them; Ginny agreed they were not a lot of fun, no matter how much Hermione seemed to enjoy them.

Harry was pleased to see that Ron was finally starting to become more accepting of him. He was not sure why the redhead was finally coming around, but Harry was thankful nevertheless.

At the Welcoming Feast, they got a surprise when they saw Sirius Black at the head table, as he had kept his new teaching job from them. When he was introduced, Harry led the clapping.

Harry had gotten to know Sirius some over the past two summers, and he liked his father's friend. When Harry had shown Sirius the Marauder's Map, Sirius had laughed so hard he fell on the floor. He had already explained about the Marauders not long after he had met Harry. This new reminder of his past caused him to launch into more stories about the four Marauders exploits. Harry did not fail to notice that Wormtail was almost never mentioned, and that was fine with him. When Moony was told that Harry knew of the Marauders, a slow

grin came to the normally serious man and he too joined in the story telling fun.

The classes for the year were going very well, despite it being their OWL year. Both Harry and Ginny were at the top of their class, narrowly beating out the Ravenclaws. The extra tutoring over the summer allowed them to do well in their core classes, which gave them extra time to study in the others.

As they were doing their prefect rounds one night near the end of September, Harry had the Marauder's Map out as they were walking. It was a great device to help catch students in broom closets. Surprised Gryffindors were embarrassed and then sent back to the Tower after being docked three points; captures from the other three houses were docked five points before being sent along. While they knew that was a little unfair, their competitiveness allowed them to rationalize it away.

Tonight it was quiet and they were about to return to the Gryffindor Tower themselves when Harry noticed a lone person leaving the dungeons. "Hey, what do you suppose Malfoy is doing?" Harry pointed to the sixth year on the map.

Ginny looked. "I don't know, but it would be fun to bust him, wouldn't it? Even if he is a prefect, it's not his night to patrol."

A slightly evil grin came over Harry. "No, it's not. Let's go see what he's up to before we get him in trouble."

They watched Malfoy go up the stairs on the map while they walked toward the Slytherin's position, trying to anticipate his destination so they could get there at the same time. As they were coming up the stairs to the seventh floor, Malfoy's dot disappeared into a wall where there was no room on the map. Looking at each other in surprise, they immediately began running. When they came to the point the Slytherin had disappeared on the map, he was not to be found. There were also no doors to any room. Even searching behind the tapestries there showed no secret rooms. They were flummoxed.

Deciding to take just a few more minutes to search, they suddenly heard footsteps. Harry realized he had not looked at the map in quite some time. Looking, he saw the label for their head of house about to turn the corner. He whispered, "Washburn's coming," as he quickly hid the map under his robes.

The teacher came around the corner and stopped. "Mr Potter, Miss Weasley. What are you doing up here?"

Always the most creative, Ginny answered. "Professor Washburn. We were about to finish our patrol and we thought we saw a student walking around by himself so we came to investigate. Unfortunately, the stairs moved and it took us too long to get here and so we can't seem to find him."

Harry did his best to hold a neutral face, but he was very impressed with the amount of truth she had woven into the lie. He saw the professor look at her watch.

"It is only a few minutes past when you should be done with your patrol and you weren't doing anything untoward, so I shall not take any points off; but as there seems to be no one here, I'll tell you to return to the Tower."

"Certainly, Professor," Ginny replied with a smile of thankfulness. She turned and headed back, not even grabbing Harry's hand until they were halfway back.

"Nice going," Harry complimented her.

"Thanks, but where do you think Malfoy went to? Fred and George said the map can't lie." Due to her lightly biting her lower lip, Harry could tell she was trying to work out the puzzle.

Harry considered that for a moment. With a new idea in mind, he pulled the map back out of his robes and searched carefully. "Ginny, look here. There is a blank space behind the wall about where Malfoy went. What if there was a room there that the map didn't know about? The twins did say they didn't know how the map was made, so while

it can't lie about things it knows about, maybe it also won't show us things it doesn't know."

Ginny considered that as they started up the stairs to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "That would make sense." Then she gave him her brilliant smile when she came up with a prank. "Of course, we can find out if that theory is true. You just have to ask Mr Padfoot tomorrow."

"Brilliant! Why didn't I think of that?"

She grinned. "And that's why you need me, Harry, because I'm the smart one." She gave the password and they went in.

"I need you for other reasons, too," Harry told her and wiggled his eyebrows, causing her to blush.

"Prat, go get your book bag, we have some homework to finish first." She left him to go up the girl's stairs, while Harry went to go get his stuff.

Back in the common room a few minutes later, Harry started his homework. He also kept glancing at the map hidden below the table top and lying on his lap as he worked for the next hour. Malfoy never made an appearance before Harry went to bed and that made Harry very curious to know what the Slytherin was doing.

The next morning, they found their Defense teacher before breakfast. "Mr Padfoot," Harry greeted him, as they had managed to catch him alone in a corridor, thanks to the map. "Can you join us in this classroom here? We have need of professional advice."

Apparently, the question and the formal delivery piqued his interest as he gave them a large goofy grin and opened the door to wave them in. "What's up, you two? Is there a prank I need to be watching for -- or," his smile somehow grew, "to help out with?"

Harry almost matched his smile. "You might think of it as a prank, but for now we just need information."

"Always a good place to start. What do you need to know?" The man looked very eager to help.

"The twins told us that they thought the Map could not lie. So if it shows a room, then it's really there," Harry started.

"Correct," he acknowledged slightly playfully.

"Is it possible for there to be a room the map does not know about?"

Sirius opened his mouth to answer, then he shut it to think some more. After several very long seconds, he finally told them, "I think it will only show what it knows about, but I would be very surprised to find a room or passage that was unknown to the map. We spent over a year making it all show up correctly. Why do you ask?"

"We caught Malfoy out alone last night, well, rather we saw him on the map. But by the time we could get to where he was, he seemed to disappear off the map and I couldn't find him again until this morning. He seemed to have come back because he was in his dorm."

"Are you sure?" Sirius queried.

"Yes," Ginny spoke up. "I saw it too. He went to the seventh floor and then seemed to just leave the map. But there was no door or passageway there. We even used the revealing spells Professor Flitwick taught us over the summer and we couldn't find anything."

"Hmm, very interesting." Sirius scratched his neck while he thought. "I'll have to take this up with Moony. He knows more about the creation of the map than I do. I'll get back with you in a couple of days. All right?"

"Thanks, Mr Padfoot!"

Sirius gave a bark of laughter. "Harry, we're going to have to give you name. You too, Ginny."

"That would be fun, but we need to learn to transform first, and we just haven't had time to learn," she told him.

"Maybe we can start that next summer, how about that?"

"Good idea," Harry was pleased and Ginny looked it too. Their meeting done, they left for breakfast.

Two days later, Harry and Ginny were sitting down to breakfast. At the moment, they had a very good view of their suspect across the room.

"He looks very tired, like he hasn't been getting enough sleep," Harry commented. "I wonder if he has glamours to hide dark circles under his eyes."

"Maybe. Do you notice that Malfoy is not talking to his ever present goons?" Ginny pointed out.

"Yeah, that's not normal for him. He's having a very quiet breakfast and not speaking to anyone."

Ginny took another bite of breakfast, still watching their suspect. "Harry, look, he's rubbing his left forearm against the edge of the table again. I think that's like the third time this morning, and I think I've seen him do it before too."

Their observations were interrupted when a brown and white speckled owl suddenly landed in front of Harry. With a smile of anticipation, he removed the letter while Ginny gave the bird a piece of bacon. Happy with its payment, the owl took off.

Ginny leaned over and put her lips next to his ear. "What does it say?" she whispered.

Harry ducked his head. "Hey, that tickles," he whispered back to her. She giggled while she anxiously looked at the parchment he was unfolding. Harry noticed that Hermione was no longer talking to Ron and was watching them from across the table, but she said nothing for the moment.

After they both read the letter from Moony, Ginny commented, "It seems that your theory was correct. That's going to make it hard on us."

"What?" Hermione asked, unable to contain herself any longer based on the expression on her face.

"Nothing important, Hermione," Ginny replied, "just a little prank advice."

"You two are prefects," Hermione huffed. "You shouldn't be doing that."

Ginny cocked an eyebrow at her friend. "If the subject is about what prefects should and should not be doing, should we also discuss what a couple of sixth year prefects were doing in a closet on the fourth floor during their patrol last night?"

Hermione actually blushed, and Ron, who was also sitting across the table and next to Hermione, stopped eating and looked at her with wide eyes.

"How did you know?" her brother asked.

Harry continued to keep quiet and enjoyed the show. He heard Ginny say, "Let's just say that there are more ways to monitor the broom closets than by opening doors."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "You put a monitoring spell in a closet, didn't you? Ginny! I can't believe you did that. I also can't believe it because that's a beyond NEWT level spell. What did you really do?"

A smile spread across the young redhead's face as she looked at the watch on her wrist. "Oh look! Time for class, we better go so we're not late, Harry." She stood up and pulled her boyfriend up too.

"Ginny!" Hermione hissed. "Come back here and explain." The couple kept walking. "Ginny!" Hermione hissed once again, and was again ignored.

Now that Harry was facing away from their friends, he could let the laugh out that he had been holding in. "That was cruel. Funny, but very cruel."

"Always keep 'em guessing, Harry. Now what are we going to do?"

Harry shrugged. "Like we've been doing, I suppose, watch the map. I'll start keeping my special cloak on me so if we notice that he's heading that direction, we can try to meet him there and hide to see what he's doing."

Ginny considered that as they approached their Charms classroom. "I can't think of anything better, unfortunately. It will be tedious and bloody boring."

He sighed. "I know."

Over the next two weeks, they almost caught Malfoy three times. However, each time, they were delayed in reaching the appropriate seventh floor corridor in time. Finally, Malfoy's luck gave out and he made the trip again while Harry and Ginny were on prefect patrol. Since Harry was waiting for this, they were on the sixth floor when the Slytherin left the dungeon area, and the two easily made it to the proper place with the Invisibility cloak over both of them.

The cloak fit only because the two stood so close together, Ginny in front of Harry with his arms around her stomach. That was a position he rather enjoyed, and based on Ginny wiggling backwards into his embrace, she did too.

They watched Malfoy walk into sight, all the while glancing around to make sure he was not being watched. When he got across from a tapestry on the wall, he paced a couple of steps back and forth. If that was not weird enough, a doorway opened up on the wall across from the tapestry.

Harry almost said something in surprise, but managed to restrain himself. With a last look around Draco Malfoy strode towards the door to go in, pausing yet again to look for anyone coming. Harry very softly whispered, "Left foot first, let's try to get in there." They started

walking, but before they could reach the right spot, Malfoy closed the door behind himself and the door disappeared.

“Bloody hell! We were so close!” Ginny forcefully whispered.

“Wait, let me try something.” Harry came out from underneath the cloak and paced like Malfoy did. Nothing happened. Trying again and thinking he needed to find the place Malfoy was hiding did not help either. “I don't know, Ginny. I guess we're just going to have to watch again and try to get in next time.”

“Well, at least we know where to stand,” she grumpily agreed.

“Yeah. You saw how he opened the door and then looked around just before he went in?”

“Good point,” she nodded in agreement. “We can try to sneak in then. Still, this is so completely frustrating.”

“Completely,” he echoed her. “Come on, it's curfew time and we need to head back to the Tower.

It was four days later when it happened again. This time, they were next to the wall where the door should appear, and it did. They had even practiced walking together under the cloak. A set of Silencing Charms were on their feet as well. Just like last time, Draco Malfoy opened the door and paused to look both ways down the hall. The two Gryffindors took that moment to sneak inside the room.

Their first problem arose: Where to hide? It was a problem because the room was filled with junk and there were very few places to stand. Hoping for the best, Harry guided Ginny up the main aisle and then to the side when the first side path presented itself. Malfoy had closed the door and almost ran them over as they had to move slower. Fortunately, they stepped to the side just in time and he walked on past them unaware of their presence.

After a sigh of relief, they went back onto the main path down the center of the room and slowly walked towards their suspect. They found Malfoy about twenty yards later working on a tall cabinet that looked something like a coffin. There was a spot they could stand out

of the way and still watch him, so they did. For the next hour and a half, they watched Draco work on the cabinet with both a few tools and his wand, although most of the work was done with his wand. They also heard enough swearing that the sixth year boy should have been in detention for the rest of his time at Hogwarts.

Besides swearing, the phrase he said most consistently was, "If I don't make this bloody thing work so they can get in, he's going to kill me; work you damned thing!"

Eventually, Draco yelled as if in triumph and put his wand up. With a smirk and a muttered, "I knew I could do it," he stepped into the cabinet and closed the door. A second or so later, there was a single soft pulse of light from around where the door met the cabinet body.

"What the hell?" Harry exclaimed. Not able to restrain his curiosity, he stepped out from underneath the Invisibility Cloak and opened the door on the cabinet. To his surprise, the cabinet was empty. "Where'd he go?"

Ginny's head appeared and she walked over too, also surprised as she looked in the cabinet. "It must have sent him somewhere else. You suppose it was broken and he was trying to fix it?"

"Seems reasonable," Harry said agreeably. As he tried to come up with more ideas, the cabinet door slowly started to close on its own. "He must be trying to come back."

"Stop it, Harry, we can't let him come back while we're here!"

Harry grabbed the door, but he could not stop it moving. "I can't..."

Not knowing what else to do, Ginny reach down and grabbed the first thing she could find. "Here, put this in the crack so the door can't close."

Harry took the book from her hand and put it in the path of the door. He saw Ginny drop the cloak and pick up a chair too. She put the back of the old wooden school chair in the closing crack as well. A

few seconds later, the door stopped moving from the objects jammed between it and the cabinet.

“OK, now what, oh smart one?” Harry asked.

“I think we're safe for the moment, now we just need to figure out where he went and how to use that to our advantage.”

Harry thought for a moment and then an idea came to him. Pulling out the Marauder's Map, he looked it over. “Ginny, run down to Sirius's office and tell him that Malfoy has left the school grounds, but he'll probably be returning soon. He'll understand the opportunity this presents.”

Ginny grinned wickedly. “I'll be back as soon as I can. You'll need to stay in here Harry since the door to the room disappears otherwise, or at least it did for Malfoy.”

“Right. Go!” He watched her run out the door. With a smile on his face, he bent down and picked up his special cloak and hid it under his robes. Another thought came to him. It might not be the wisest thing, but it should increase his safety. Pulling out his wand, he walked around the cabinet. With a couple of well placed cutting spells, he cut the hinges off the cabinet and watched the door drop to the ground. He would destroy the cabinet later, but for the moment, it could not be used while it could still be repaired if needed.

He looked on the map and saw that Ginny had just arrived at the office two floors below and was talking to Sirius. A moment later, the two of them seemed to be running towards the Headmistress' office.

Since he had a few minutes, Harry decided to look around. Now that he was not watching Malfoy, he realized the room was enormous. It was easily fifty yards wide by one hundred yards long. There was no way this would fit in the space left for it on the map. In fact, when he looked on the map, he saw that he was not on it, even though he was in the room. This was truly a very magical room.

Watching the map, he saw Ginny and Sirius reach the Headmistress' office, where McGonagall was. After a minute or so, she walked over

to Sirius and he disappeared a few seconds later. He wondered what they were doing. Searching carefully, he saw a label move near the gates of the school; it was Sirius. Harry guessed she had created a Portkey for him to the gates, something only the Headmistress could do, and only to or from her office, or so Flitwick had said once. He smiled and had to hand it to McGonagall; that was very smart. A minute or so later, he saw Flitwick's label walk towards the office.

Harry's smile became bigger a few minutes later when he saw Malfoy's label suddenly appear at the front gate, very close to where Sirius was standing. The two labels seemed to merge for a moment and just stand still. Then, the two labels started walking towards the castle. Harry's grin came back; there was nothing like a spur-of-the-moment prank working, especially on such a deserving person -- the git! Malfoy had given almost every non-Slytherin in the castle grief on-and-off over the years.

He continued to watch the labels move across the map. Sirius and Malfoy went up to the Headmistress' office. After nearly fifteen more minutes, all five of the people in the office left and started walking. It did not take Harry long to realize they were coming this way. So he quickly went over to the door and opened it, standing there so it would not close. Soon, he saw McGonagall, Sirius, Flitwick, Ginny, and Malfoy (in Sirius's custody) coming down the hall. As soon as Draco saw him with the door open, the Slytherin's proud sneering face fell.

"Mr Potter," the Headmistress addressed him. "Is this the place Miss Weasley told me about?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've stayed here to make sure we could find it again."

The older witch turned to the young Slytherin. "Mr Malfoy, I'll ask you again. How did you find this room and what were you doing?" He stayed silent and Harry figured the questioning was what had taken so long in the office. "You are already in danger of being expelled for leaving the school grounds in an unauthorized fashion."

"Very well, Mr Malfoy, you leave me little choice. Incarcerous!" Ropes shot out of her wand and bound the boy's wrists and then his arms to his body.

"You can't do this!" Malfoy shouted.

"Will you answer my questions?" McGonagall gave him a piercing look. He went back to being silent. "In that case, Sirius, please take him to the old holding room in the dungeon and magically seal the door to make sure he stays there until the morning."

"Professor McGonagall?" Harry boldly spoke up. "I think we can answer at least part of your question."

Her right eyebrow went up nearly to the top of her forehead. "Oh? Do tell, Mr Potter."

"Well, while he was working, he kept talking about having to get it to work so someone could come through it." Although he did not say anything, Malfoy struggled against Sirius's hold to get to Harry. To do what, he did not know, as the most Malfoy could do to him now was kick him in the shin.

McGonagall turned to the prisoner. "You were trying to give access to the castle to someone else?" She sounded very incredulous. "Who?" Malfoy just sneered at her and did not say anything. Harry was surprised Malfoy was not saying anything, given how much he liked to brag.

"I can make a guess at that too, Professor. Lift up his left sleeve. He's been rubbing his forearm a lot lately -- all term, we think," Harry told them.

Sirius was the first to realize what Harry was implying. With his wand, Sirius cut the ropes over the boy's left forearm and grabbed Draco's arm. The boy fought to prevent the action, but it was not long before Sirius had the boy's left sleeve up and everyone could see the Dark Mark on his arm.

McGonagall paled at that. "My word! He was going to let Death Eaters in. This is much more serious. Mr Potter, please show me what he was working on."

Harry led them in. "This cabinet, Professor. I removed the door so it couldn't be used."

She took one look and gasped. "A Vanishing Cabinet! This is very serious indeed." She turned to the other teachers. "Sirius, please take Mr Malfoy back to my office and do not loosen your hold on him for a second. Once there, feel free to tie him to a chair and call the Aurors. I want the Director to come too. I shall be there within half an hour." The Defense teacher retied Draco Malfoy's arms and then led the protesting boy away.

Flitwick looked very thoughtful. "I now have an additional question: How did he know this was here? I'm also curious to know what this room is."

"It seems to be a huge storeroom, or maybe a place where everything that's been lost in the castle goes." Harry waved his hand around. "You won't believe some of the junk I found in here while I was waiting for you."

The short professor leaned down and picked up a textbook off the floor. Opening it, he chuckled. "I think this book is older than I am. It's at least five versions out of date."

Ginny gasped. "Harry? Do you think the jewel we were searching for over the summer might be in here?"

His eyes went wide along with the two professors. "It might be. This would be a great place to hide something. It would be very hard to find it in here. Hmm ... Accio Ravenclaw's Jewel!" They all heard a slight thunk on the left side of the room further back. He walked that way. "Accio Ravenclaw's Jewel!" he cast again. This time there was no sound.

"It's here!" Ginny shouted. "Now we just have to find it."

“But...”

“I know, Harry. You moved it the first time and now it's wedged somewhere so we'll have to search, but we know it's here and we really only have to search half the room from here on back.” Ginny looked very happy. “This will all be over soon.”

“Yeah, but do you know how long that might take?” Harry exclaimed, looking incredulous as he considered his own question while he surveyed the mounds of junk in the room. “And we can't leave here until we find it because we don't know how to get back in. In fact, we don't know that the room will even stay here if we leave the door open but no one's in the room. It might only stay this way because we're here, like we were when Malfoy first opened the door.”

“Then we'll just have to stay here until we find it,” Ginny said as if her word was law.

“I am not comfortable with that idea, but I also don't know if your theory is correct or not either.” The frustrated Headmistress looked at the two students thinking. With a look of inspiration, she called out, “Brolly?”

A house-elf popped in. “Yes, Headmistress?” He looked up at her awaiting her command.

“Brolly, do you know where we are right now? I've never seen this room before.”

“Yes, Headmistress. It is the Come-and-Go room, or sometimes called the Room of Requirement. A person only has to walk in front of the door three times thinking of what he needs, and the room will make itself like that.” They all blinked at him for a moment.

“So I think of something, like a park, walk in front of the door thinking about that, the door will appear and I'll find a park in here?” Harry asked. The elf nodded and Harry sighed. “While we now know about the room, we're still stuck here.”

"Why?" Flitwick asked, before he suddenly said. "Oh... I understand. Unless we know exactly what Mr Malfoy was thinking about, we can't come back to this exact place. Minerva, I do not believe we have a choice. They must stay here and search, even though tomorrow is a class day."

McGonagall looked around and pulled out her wand. She was unsuccessful in summoning the jewel as well; it seemed to be stuck, wherever it was hidden. "Very well, but I want at least one other student in here." She looked at her colleague. "Who would you suggest?"

"I think Hermione would be best," Ginny suggested. "We can work well with her and she may know spells that could help."

"A capital idea, Miss Weasley," Flitwick agreed.

The usually stern looking Headmistress seemed to almost smile. "Yes, I think Miss Granger would do admirably. Filius? If you would help them set up three beds, a table and chairs, and a changing area? Mr Potter, if you would come with me, you can retrieve a change of clothes. I'll have Miss Granger get some for you, Miss Weasley."

Hermione was still in the common room when they arrived. She was very surprised to see the Headmistress there at this time of night. She looked like she wanted to burst of curiosity because she could not ask Harry what was going on. Fortunately, Ron had already gone to bed so Harry did not have to answer questions from him. Harry thought he could get his things without waking anyone else in his dorm room and left to do so.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall addressed the sixth year. "I need to you come with me for a special task that will last through at least tomorrow. You will need to go upstairs and get a change of clothes for both yourself and Miss Weasley. You will be excused from classes for this."

That seemed to fuel Hermione's curiosity all the more, but she held it while she went upstairs. Harry was back soon and Hermione came down a couple of minutes later. The three of them left the Tower to go

back to the Room of Requirement. Hermione was amazed at the room and stopped just inside the door.

“Miss Granger,” the Headmistress addressed the student after she had walked in. “Mr Potter and Miss Weasley have a very special task. There is a large blue jewel probably in a diadem in this room.”

“Are you sure, with all this junk?” she was incredulous, not thinking of the fact that she had just questioned the Headmistress.

McGonagall actually smiled slightly. “Yes, we tried to summon it and heard it get stuck on or in something. It is extremely important that we find this jewel, although I can not tell you why and I must ask you not to ask about it. You are here to be a chaperone, as well as to help them search. One of us will return tomorrow morning at eight with breakfast and at noon with lunch. If needed, we'll arrange meals beyond that. These two will explain the room and how it works. Considering the present time, I suggest you make it a quick conversation and then immediately go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning.” The two professors left and the door closed behind them.

Hermione turned and gave them her most piercing stare. “Explain!” she commanded.

Harry let Ginny explain while he stepped behind the changing screen to change into his pyjamas. When he was done, he took up the story while Ginny changed. Hermione had more questions and asked them while she changed. They finished up with the three of them sitting on their own beds.

“If I hadn't seen this, I'm not sure I'd believe you,” she told them at the end. The other two laughed. “Good-night.”

“Night, Hermione,” Harry and Ginny said in union. Harry moved over to the edge of his bed and Ginny did the same. They kissed good-night before Harry cast “Nox” to turn out the lights.

It was strange to be in a totally pitch-black room, since there were no lights, but Harry fell asleep fairly quickly anyway. During the night, he

had the strangest dream about Ginny, but since he often dreamed of her, he just enjoyed it.

He woke up in the morning and the strangeness continued. He would swear that he was with Ginny as he could smell her perfume. Then the sensation of hair over part of his face and a weight on his right side hit him. He also realized his arm was around a warm body that was the right size to be Ginny. Although he did not move, he suddenly realized what happened during the night. Paying attention to all of his senses, he realized that Ginny was indeed next to him with her head on his shoulder. He panicked as he considered what would happen if McGonagall walked in right now; but he did not know what to do as he also did not want to disturb her. This felt awfully nice.

Harry laid there and enjoyed the sensation of sleeping with Ginny for quite sometime. He was startled by an alarm from his right and a light a few seconds later. He looked over a head of red hair to see Hermione stretching before she sat up and looked around.

“Ginny! What are you doing?!” Hermione's face had wide eyes and an incredulous look.

The yelling woke the redhead, although she did not make a startled movement. When she realized where she was, Harry saw her grin just before she stretched upward and gave him a short kiss. “Mmm, the best night's sleep I've ever had.”

“Ginny! You're not supposed to be in Harry's bed!”

The redhead rolled over onto her back before she slowly sat up. “Don't knock it until you've tried it, Hermione,” she quipped unrepentantly. “I had trouble going to sleep until I moved, then I quickly fell asleep. That really was the best night's sleep I've ever had. It was a wonderful way to wake up, too.” When the speechless sixth year just gaped at her, Ginny got up and took her change of clothes behind the screen to get ready for the day.

Harry saw Hermione now staring at him. “Hey, don't look at me, I didn't change beds. But I will say that I agree with Ginny. That was a wonderful way to wake up.” A large goofy grin was now on his face.

Hermione harrumphed. "What am I going to do with you two?" She grabbed her clothes to change when Ginny came out. Harry went last. They also took turns going to a bathroom not too far down the corridor.

Professor McGonagall came shortly thereafter. Satisfied to see them all up and all three beds having been slept in, she left them to eat the breakfast a house-elf brought them before they started searching.

As soon as breakfast was done, the three started the search. Harry and Ginny showed Hermione where the Vanishing Cabinet was. They cleared a path from there to the side wall so they had a boundary on the search. Hermione estimated they had about forty percent of the room to look through.

At first, they picked up each item and tossed it to the other side of the room and that was slow going. After an hour, Ginny got tired of that and waved her wand around in a small area and cast "Accio books!" Several dozen books in the area she had pointed to came flying to her. She ducked and let them land behind her.

Harry thought that was a great idea and did the same thing with clothes. He was almost buried in garments as they hit him and knocked him down. The girls laughed at him. Ginny came over and pulled a pair of girl's knickers off of his head and held them in front of him. "And what were you planning on doing with these, Mr Potter?" she asked with a large smirk on her face.

He blushed hotly for a moment, but then he smirked in return. "Why, Miss Weasley, do you need some right now?"

Ginny flushed as deeply as he had, but a tiny sparkle was visible in her eyes. She turned and stepped back towards the remaining junk. "Well, that saved some time, anyway."

Harry grinned at his successful tease and followed her, deciding to let her off for the moment.

Hermione approached a trunk they had uncovered.

"Wait! Stop!" Harry yelled.

The brunette did stop and turned to look at him like he had lost his mind. "What?"

"Do you know the revealing spell to detect magic, especially magical traps?"

She nodded yes.

"You must cast that on anything you think might hold the jewel. It will probably be hidden and might even have protective spells on it," Harry explained.

"Really?"

"Really."

Hermione shrugged and cast the spell. The trunk came up clean, so she opened it up. It was empty. With a sigh, she levitated it to the other side of the room out of the area they were searching and went back to seek the diadem.

By lunch time, they had cleared about five yards back, although it went the full twenty-five yards across. Flitwick was impressed when he brought them lunch and to check on them. He did a few organization charms on the side they did not have to search to straighten things there, so they would have more room to stack items from the area they were trying to clear.

The afternoon was more of the same. Flitwick also brought them dinner. They spent a few hours searching after dinner, but Hermione stopped by eight so she could do some homework, while Harry and Ginny used the time to sit closely and talk. The three also took turns going one at a time back to their dorm room to get another change of cloths. They each answered, "Sorry, I can't talk about it," to everyone who asked where they had been.

That night, much to Hermione's consternation, Ginny crawled into her bed, wiggled around a bit, then moved over into Harry's bed to sleep. Hermione rolled her eyes, but she did not say anything.

The next day was much the same as the day before, except that they were learning to move things faster by casting the revealing spell over a wider area then moving the whole area at once. It was a little after four in the afternoon when Hermione did a revealing spell on yet another wardrobe and the wardrobe lit up like a beacon and also shot a spell back at her. Fortunately, Harry was standing nearby and managed to shove her out of the way just before the spell went through the air right where she had been standing. All three of them looked backwards and saw a huge scorched spot in the discarded junk.

"T-Thanks, Harry," Hermione told him with a little trembling in her voice.

"No problem." He slowly walked towards the wardrobe, stopping a few feet in front of it. With care, he pulled things that were stacked around it away.

"You think that's it?" Ginny asked.

"Seems reasonable to me," Harry said while moving a stack of chairs. He finally got one side clear. Stepping back to give himself a fraction of a second more reaction time, he sent a vanishing spell at the side of the wardrobe. He was pleased to see that nothing happened except for the wood disappearing. "Tom was stupid only protecting the doors. Accio jewel!" A bust came out of the cabinet with a circlet on it. The silver circlet had a very large blue jewel in the center. "Yes!" he hissed.

Ginny ran over to him and gave him a hug and a quick kiss. "I'd say we need to go get the Headmistress, but it's almost dinner time. We can wait for them to come." Everyone agreed.

Hermione went back to their little living area and pulled out her books and started studying. Harry and Ginny went over to his bed and sat on it like a couch, leaning against the headboard.

"While I'm glad we found it, I'm sorry it didn't take longer," Ginny told her boyfriend. Hermione looked up, unable to ignore the comment.

Harry played with her hand while his other arm was around her shoulders. "Why's that? I mean, I'm enjoying the holiday from classes, but I suspect you mean more than that."

"Uh-huh." She stretched and gave him a lingering kiss. "I like the time to ourselves, but more importantly, I won't be able to sleep with you again. I've really enjoyed that these last two nights." Hermione glanced at them and shook her head before returning to her book.

"It was pretty brilliant waking up with my best friend." He kissed her temple and pulled her in closer. "We'll have to wait until we finish school, but maybe we could make arrangements to wake up together every day."

Looks of surprise and hope filled her face. They were so concentrating on each other, they did not hear Hermione gasp as she looked up at them. "Do you really mean that, Harry?"

"Yes, Ginny, one day. Like I said, you're my best friend and I'd like you to always be with me. In fact, I can't imagine spending my life with anyone else." The look of love on Ginny's face was too much for him, so he bent his neck to give her a kiss, which turned into serious snogging.

They were so caught up in themselves and unaware of the room around them, that they were very surprised to hear a loud cough. Looking up, they saw Professor Flitwick with the biggest smirk on his face that they had ever seen. To the side, they saw Hermione with her hand over her mouth trying to hold the laughter in.

"So," he all but squeaked, "is this a before dinner break or has something monumental happened?" The couple blushed very red.

"Well, I, uh, um," Harry stumbled over his words.

“Monumental! Harry just made me a life-long promise,” Ginny's words rushed out of her.

“Congratulations, Miss Weasley. A promise that comes after you finish school, I hope?” Flitwick just stood there with a small smile as if this was a daily occurrence, or else a prophesied event that he had been waiting on so there was no surprise. Ginny nodded. “Then definitely congratulations. I have brought you dinner,” he waved to the elf behind him who was putting dinner on the table where Hermione had been working. “How's your progress?”

“Oh, well, we found it a little bit ago,” Harry told him.

“Really?!” Now the professor did squeak in his excitement. “Where is it?”

The three students got up and walked over to the bust with the circlet lying on the floor. They had been afraid to touch it. Flitwick did a series of spells on it. “Excellent! I'm proud of all three of you.”

“Professor?”

“Yes, Miss Granger.”

“Uh, I think it would be a good idea if you were to destroy that wardrobe.” She pointed to the one the Horcrux had been hidden in. “When we tried to open it, it threw a spell at me. I don't think that should be left here for anyone else to find.”

“Quite right and good thinking, Miss Granger. Since we don't care about anything in it and I don't have to remove the protective charms, that does make it easier.” He pulled out his wand and said a very long spell. A gray sphere sprung up around the wardrobe. With one last word and the down stroke of his wand, the sphere rapidly contracted, briefly flaring white, then disappearing altogether. When it was done, all that was left was a small pile of ash, which the Charms professor Vanished.

Flitwick conjured a wooden box and then levitated the bust and diadem into it. “Please have some dinner since it is here. When you

are done, you're free to return to Gryffindor Tower and resume your normal schedule. When anyone asks, you were away doing some research for Professor McGonagall and myself. If they pester you for more information, feel free to send them to us."

"Thank you, Professor," the three students told him.

"Professor?" Harry stopped him before he could leave. "What happened to Malfoy?"

"Ah, yes, Mr Malfoy. He has been expelled and is presently awaiting trial for being a member of a subversive group, as well as conspiracy to endanger the public. I suspect you won't be seeing him for at least the next five years. While he won't be in Azkaban because of his age, there are other places for people like him."

With that, Flitwick left with the box to go see Minerva, so she could call Albus to have it destroyed. The students went back to their Tower after dinner, but not before Harry sent three Blasting Hexes at the Vanishing Cabinet. It would never be useful again.

After that, the rest of the year seemed unexciting and the school was a happier place as Slytherin House became a better behaved group of students.

"Year 6"

The summer after their fifth year was more of the same. Harry and Ginny spent a lot of time with each other. They also spent some time with Ron and Hermione, who were surprisingly still dating. Although it had taken nearly five years, Ron seemed to be fairly accepting of Harry now. It was Ginny's theory that it had merely taking that long for Ron to grow up and for him to see Ginny as something more than "a little sister". But they would never know as Ron would not explain his previous feelings about Harry to anyone who asked him.

When they were not having fun together or with their friends, Harry and Ginny spent more time with Professors McGonagall and Flitwick. The young couple had finished all the spell work Hogwarts offered in Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration, and were working on master's level material.

September the first came around again and Hogwarts restarted its official classes. While Harry, Ginny, and Ron continued being prefects, Hermione and Terry Boot became Head Girl and Head Boy, respectively. That caused Parvati to become the female seventh year prefect, which gave Ron and Hermione a few problems to have to work through when Ron seemed to look at the attractive Indian girl a little more than Hermione thought he should.

Harry became the Quidditch captain. Ginny played Chaser and Ron played Keeper. Their prospects looked good for the year.

After their first game the third week in October, where Gryffindor defeated Hufflepuff by two hundred points, Harry and Ginny were walking around the lake, enjoying the Saturday afternoon together. As they came around a clump of bushes near the far end of the lake, Harry heard something rattle the leaves. In his haste to pull Ginny to the side, they both wound up falling into the lake.

As Ginny's head broke the surface of the freezing water, she turned to her boyfriend who was also chest deep in the water. "Harry!"

"Reducto!"

She saw his wand out and turning she saw the largest snake she had ever seen on the shore coming toward them, until the dark red spell hit it and the first twelve inches of the snake seemed to explode. Ginny threw her arms around his neck and held on tightly, shivering from more than just the cold water. "I-Is it dead?" she asked into his neck. She felt his other arm go around her waist now, protectively pulling her to him.

"Yeah. If I hadn't heard it first, I'd hate to think of what might have happened." A shiver ran through him as well. "Come on, let's get out of here; I'm freezing."

She gave him a forced laugh, but followed him to the shore and let him pull her up after he had climbed out. She looked at the snake more closely now that she was out of the water. "That's disgusting!"

"I agree." Harry cast a drying charm on her and on himself. "I'm going to get the body. Can you get the head, or what's left of it?" He levitated the body, which seemed to be close to fifteen feet long, and started walking towards the castle. Ginny made a face and did the same for the mangled head. They dropped the parts near the front door of the castle.

"Ginny? If you'll go get Professor McGonagall, you won't have to look at it," Harry suggested. Ginny seemed glad to leave as she quickly walked away. A few minutes later, the Headmistress and Professor Flitwick came out with Ginny, who went over to Harry while doing her best to look anywhere other than at the dead snake.

"This snake tried to attack us," Harry explained before he even asked. "We were walking around the lake and it came out of some bushes. I threw us into the water before I shot a Blasting Hex down its throat."

Flitwick used a spell to straighten the snake out and to put the head in the right place. "That is the largest snake I've ever seen. Do you suppose the rumors are true, Minerva?"

"They must be..."

"What rumors, Professor?" Harry asked.

"That You-Know-Who is taking a more active part in the war. I suspect that is his snake, his familiar. I must take this to Albus." She conjured a good-sized wicker basket and put the snake parts in it. Looking at the students, she told them. "Excellent defense work, take fifty points for Gryffindor."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry nodded.

"Be very careful, you two. In fact, I will strongly suggest no more walks around the lake. Please stay near the castle when you go outside. Also, have others with you if at all possible; there is strength in numbers."

"Yes, Professor."

The professors and the basket of snake parts went inside.

"That's not fair," Ginny complained.

"No, it's not," Harry slowly commiserated with her, "but I understand."

"Yeah, I do too, but I still don't like it."

The next weekend, the Headmistress announced a Hogsmeade visit for those fourth year and up starting at ten and lasting until four that afternoon. The third years complained, but she halted that by explaining that she was only allowing those who were able to produce a shield, and that had only recently been covered in the fourth year classes.

A little after ten, Harry and Ginny were walking with Ron and Hermione to the magical town to enjoy a rare day out. They had also been told not to expect any more trips before the holidays.

The foursome had barely walked into town when multiple Apparation cracks sounded from all over the main thoroughfare. Harry pulled his friends over to the nearest store, which happened to be the post office, using the wall to "guard his back" so no one could sneak up on them. With Harry and Ginny in the front of the semi-circle, Ron was on the left side and Hermione on the right, they did their best to take out as many Death Eaters as they could. They also tried to help out other students by shooting a spell to distract a Death Eater, allowing the student to run behind something.

They had dropped almost a dozen Death Eaters with Blasting Hexes when they had to stop. Two new arrivals demanded their full attention. Hermione screamed when she saw the tall thin man with red eyes and almost no nose. Ron did not look much better, even though he did not scream.

A wild looking black haired woman that was beside Him laughed. "Let me take care of them, my Lord." She strode forward wand in hand, walking in front of her evil master before he could say anything.

"You are such a pest," Ginny said. "Inflecto!" A brownish spell shot from Ginny's wand straight for Bellatrix Lestrange's head.

The Death Eater quickly tilted her head and the spell went right past her ear. "Aww, you missed me, wittle giwl," she cackled in a fake baby voice before she gave an insane laugh. There was a muffled grunt from behind her.

As her head went backwards in laughter, Harry soundlessly shot the same spell at her, and hit her directly in the body. The laughter stopped as her body changed from soft skin to hard armor and shrank. Wanting to make sure they did not get away, Harry conjured a large glass bowl, upside down, over where Bellatrix had been standing. For good measure, he also cast an Unbreakable Charm on the glass.

Looking around, Harry saw that about twenty of the nearly fifty Death Eaters were down on the ground and would not be getting up anytime soon, as most of them seemed to have a pool of red fluid next to them. The rest of the Death Eaters were engaged in combat with the older students, a handful of other adults members, and four Aurors. As the foursome started weighing into the battle again, five squads of four Aurors each Apparated into the middle of the street. The battle was over less than a minute later.

Besides the usual questions of "Is anyone hurt?", "Do we have them all?", and "Is it secure?", Harry also heard, "I thought you said You-Know-Who was here, where is he?"

With a smile at he and his friend's good fortune, Harry walked over to the glass bowl that was about ten yards away to look at the answer to the last question. Looking through the glass, he saw a medium-sized brown scorpion and large black scorpion locked in mortal combat, each stinging the other. Ginny, Hermione, and Ron joined him in looking at the miniature fight under glass. The scene in front of them was like an accident, you did not really want to look, but your curiosity drove you to look anyway.

"You know, I do appreciate Bella's insanity; her laughter was just the opening I needed," Harry commented.

"True," Ginny agreed as she also watched the fight at her feet with a slight distaste for the bugs. "However, I appreciate Bella stepping in front of Voldemort and blocking his view. I'm not sure either one of us could have landed a spell on him otherwise."

"You were bloody lucky, Ginny!"

"Ron, language!"

"I know the black one is bigger, but aren't the little brown ones supposed to be more venomous?" Ginny asked dispassionately.

"Yes," Hermione answered authoritatively, mesmerized by the ugly sight in front of her..

Harry removed the bowl. "Well, I suppose I should put them out of their misery." He picked up his right boot and ground the heel into the hard dirt crushing the two fighting scorpions. When he pulled his boot back, there were two smears of bugs on the ground; neither bug moved anymore. "Well, I'd say this calls for a celebration. The Butterbeer is on me in the Three Broomsticks!"

"Yeah, sounds good mate!" Ron shouted as an old wizard walked up.

"Mr Potter, are you all right? I heard Voldemort was here."

Harry looked at him, taking a couple of seconds to recognize the old wizard he had not seen for a few years. "Oh, Mr Dumbledore, sure, we're perfectly fine, not a scratch on us."

"If you don't mind me asking, what were you looking at on the ground?"

"Voldemort accidentally got transfigured and he didn't survive. You're welcome to change him back for the evidence, but I think this ends his reign of terror," Harry said proudly.

"Brilliant, Mr Potter, I knew you could do it!" Dumbledore shook Harry's hand.

"Thank you, sir, but Ginny did the harder part; it was definitely a team effort." Ginny blushed at Harry's praise, but she shook the old man's hand too.

"Excellent work, Miss Weasley. Well, I suppose I should change them back so we have the evidence of their death." Dumbledore pulled out his wand.

"Help yourself," Harry told him as he put his arm around Ginny's waist and started walking her towards their favorite Hogsmeade pub.

They had not taken more than five steps when they heard, "Reverto!" followed by the sound of someone vomiting.

"I suppose that wasn't a pleasant sight," Ron guessed as he walked hand-in-hand with Hermione, the "scene" taking place behind them.

"No, I suppose not, but you would think that at his age he would have guessed what he would get when he started with two squished bugs." Harry received multiple mutters of "True, true."

"Harry?"

"Yes, Ginny?"

"What do you supposed the power he knows not was? I didn't see anything exceptional back there."

"What do you mean, Ginny?" Hermione's inquisitive nature showed itself.

"There was a prophecy," Harry explained. "It said that either Voldemort or I had to kill the other, and that I would have a power that he knows not."

"Hmm, well, I agree with Ginny. What was the power?" Ron queried.

"Not sure," Harry answered, "but I'd say that a pissed off girlfriend might be a good guess."

“Harry!” Ginny roared and glared at him.

“What? You were pissed off, weren't you?”

“Well, yeah, they were ruining our date, but still, you didn't have to say it that way,” she told him with another glare.

“Oh right, sorry. Well, how about I make it up to you later, we could find a nice quite place and...”

“Harry!” Ron shouted, interrupting his friend. “I'm her brother and I do not want to hear anything like that.”

They had come to the pub, although it was questionable as to how long it would take before they were served, as everyone seemed to be out in the street looking at the aftermath of the fight.

“Like I said, Ron. All the Butterbeer and food you want this afternoon, and it's all on me.”

“Yes!” Ron shouted as he dragged Hermione inside, his objection from a few seconds ago already forgotten.

“And as for you,” Harry stopped talking and put his lips to her ear and whispered.

Ginny giggled, shook her mane of hair, grabbed his face with her hands and kissed him hard. When she let him go, she saw a gob smacked look on his face, which made her laugh. “Yes!” she echoed her brother. “And I can't wait for tonight. Come on, Harry, I need to eat so I'll have energy for that.” She led him into the pub to join their friends.

Due to the new circumstances, no more Evil Overlord and his stupid Death Minions, Hogsmeade weekends were reinstated for third years and up. They also happened every other weekend.

The only thing that marred Harry and Ginny's school year was having to deal with everyone trying to congratulate them on their victory. They dealt with it the best they could, usually in secret corridors and

dark alcoves, snogging until the well-wishers got tired of looking for them and went away.

“Year 7”

As his epic task was complete, Harry took the summer off with no extra training. Of course, Ginny joined him. They spent most of the summer hanging out with school friends from their study group, as well as traveling around England on day trips just to have fun. Sometimes their friends, including Ron and Hermione, went with them, but most of the time it was just the two of them.

The summer also gave them time to see “family”. It was pretty common for Harry and Ginny to spend one evening every couple of weeks at Cedric and Cho's flat. They had been married over Easter break a few months before. Harry and Ginny liked spending time with Cedric and Cho because they treated the younger couple like adults; they also treated the younger couple like real people and not celebrities.

The other “family” Harry and Ginny saw with regularity was Sirius and Remus. Those two were always amusing to be around, even more so now that they had started dating too. Remus seemed to be slowly getting to know Nymphadora Tonks, while Sirius's date seemed to change weekly. Harry was not sure how Sirius did that and he had no plans to find out; that would be asking for trouble in the form of great embarrassment. Dinner parties with the six of them were never boring.

The only unusual part of the summer was getting their letters from school. Both Harry and Ginny each had a special badge in their envelope, as well as a letter of congratulations from the Headmistress. She told them it was the first time since his parents that both the Head Boy and Head Girl were Gryffindors. Mrs Weasley was over the moon at her daughter's position.

Ginny was over the moon the day after her birthday, but for a different reason. Harry secretly took her to Paris for the day. Harry wished he could have come up with something more original, as he figured “everyone” did what he was about to do, but he could not come up with a better idea.

Harry bought a Portkey to Paris. They spent the afternoon walking around and enjoying the time together. They found a quaint little restaurant with patio seating and had a very nice dinner, which included a glass of wine -- the first for both of them. It was easy to eat in public here as they were not celebrities in France like they were back in their home country.

After Ginny swore she could not eat another morsel, Harry paid the bill and took her for a leisurely walk. It was not long before they came to the Eifel Tower, lit in bright lights in the early nighttime.

"Oh, it's so pretty. Can we go to the top? Please Harry?"

Harry smiled at her. "I could never deny my beautiful best friend such a simple pleasure." That was especially true since he had led her here on purpose.

"You prat, you're laying it on too thick," but she was smiling and dragged him forward. Harry pulled out some more Muggle money and paid for their vertical trip. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close during their short wait for the elevator. Before long, they took the elevator ride and were at the top.

Ginny raced over to the edge, laughing and dragging Harry with her. At the rail, she stopped and looked, stunned at the sight, not even realizing Harry had again wrapped her in his arms from behind. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh," Harry agreed while rubbing his cheek on the side of her head, enjoying the smell of her hair. "But it's not as beautiful as you."

Ginny snorted. "Right. That was definitely over the top, but thank you anyway."

"No Ginny, I really mean it. Yes, it's beautiful up here. It's not as wonderful as flying, but the warm breeze and being this far up is wonderful. But it all pales next to you. You're so much more beautiful and wonderful. You're also funny and smart and just right for me. You're my best friend in the whole world and I love you so much I want that to never end."

Ginny twisted in his embrace and turned to him with a tear coming out of her right eye. "Oh, Harry, I love you too." She kissed him gently but with passion. As she pulled back, she told him. "Harry, you're my best friend too, and I know that will never end."

"That's what I want, too. Ginny, will you make me the luckiest man in the world and marry me?" he watched her eyes light up and she kissed him again; it was anything but gentle this time.

She squeezed him so tight it was hard to breath. "Yes, Harry, yes, yes, yes!" She loosened her hold and they both laughed together before they were back to kissing.

Eventually, they stopped long enough for Harry to pull a ring with a large diamond out of his pocket and put it on her finger. As it went on, it shrunk slightly to fit her finger perfectly. They stayed on top of the tower until it was time for their Portkey to take them home. Harry moved them to the shadows and they left from there.

They arrived in the back garden of the Burrow and almost fell down. It was hard to stay quiet and not laugh, but they managed. Since it was after midnight and all the lights in the house were out, the couple settled themselves in the hammock on the back porch and talked. They were so comfortable and enjoyed the time together so much, they eventually fell asleep there.

The next morning, Molly Weasley came downstairs to start breakfast, the sun not quite having risen yet. In the pale light, the dawn not far away, she noticed through her window that someone was on back porch in the hammock.

Drawing her wand, she stepped outside and saw Harry with her daughter curled up next him. They looked so cute that way, but it was still wrong. She was about to yell at the two, figuring a rude awakening would be the start of a good punishment, when she saw her daughter's left hand lying on the boy's chest. The engagement ring could not be missed. As much as she wanted to yell, she could not bring herself to. Molly returned into the house to prevent the sniffles that threatened to burst out of her from waking her "babies".

Inside, she sat down for a few minutes and quietly cried in joy. A part of her knew this was going to happen seven years ago when that wonderful little boy caught her daughter as she fell from the sky, but she had been afraid to think about it in more than dreams lest she jinx the idea.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she got up and started fixing the best breakfast she could. She also had a small party to plan for tonight too. She would have to call Dee as soon as she knew Harry had told her so it could be a joint party. Oh, there was so much to do today and Molly knew she was going to love every second of it.

Harry finished the last of his NEWTs. He had to agree with the designation, they were nasty and exhausting. Fortunately, he was more than prepared. As he got up to turn his test in, Ginny joined him and turned hers in too; she had been done for several minutes. He really was not too bothered by the fact that his fiancée had actually finished a few points ahead of him; although, in the privacy of his own mind, the competitive part of him wished he had finished first in his class. The fact that he even got second was due to all the extra tutoring he had received over the summers for his fated task.

"I'm glad that's over," Ginny told him after they had walked out the door.

"Yeah, me too. Too bad for the rest of them didn't have our extra training to make it easier." They both chuckled.

"They didn't have your prophesied task either," Ginny pointed out.

Harry nodded soberly. "So now what?"

"I think..." she pretended to ponder the question, "a nice shady tree by the lake until dinner."

"You wish is my command, milady." He led her outside into the warm air and sunshine. The clouds were few but large and fluffy.

"Just think, we get a month off before we start our new jobs," she said wistfully as they walked.

Harry snorted. "If that's the most important thing on your mind, then I need to take you to St Mungo's." She laughed, which Harry loved to hear.

"Of course not, my husband-to-be. I'm just thinking of our future from your perspective."

"Uh-huh, right. So I should think of the future from your perspective then?" She nodded. "OK, then it's one month until training camp starts so you can fly before all the cheering crowds as Puddlemere's most beautiful Chaser, enjoying me watching you while I fly around looking for the Snitch," he told her with a smirk.

"Git!" She slugged him. "You know that is not the most important thing on my mind! We've only got a little over one week before that event."

"Oh, that event!" She tried to slug him on the arm again, but he dodged and he grabbed her in a tight hug so she couldn't swing again. When she glared at him, he kissed her. She pretended to spit something out, as if she had eaten something distasteful. When she quit mocking the kiss, he kissed her again; it was a game they had play many times over the year -- a school year which had been nearly picture perfect.

When she smiled at him, he kissed her with purpose. "Just think, nine mornings from now, we can wake up together every morning."

She melted into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Umm, I like that thought." Her expression turned impish. "Of course, I also like the thought of what we'll do eight nights from now, when we can always go to bed with one another."

He growled at her. "Don't remind me. It was hard enough to abstain this past year, especially with our own rooms."

"Tell me about it." She pulled back from the embrace and they finished walking the last little bit to their favorite tree. "Harry, what do you want to do after Quidditch? That career won't last forever."

He sat down and pulled her into his lap, wrapping his arms around her. "I don't know, Ginny. I only know that as long as you're near, I'll be happy. As long as you're there when I come home at night. As long as you're there to help me raise our children. As long as you're with me as we grow old together, then it will be fine."

She leaned against him and almost purred, "I love you, Harry."

"I love you too, Ginny."

"Epilogue?"

Fate decided she had had enough work for the day, well for what she called a day. Her time had no real measure of meaning to those she affected so much. Her feet were tired and her brain hurt, and she decided she needed a nice comforting story to veg with for awhile. There was one she liked more than about any other.

Walking over to the shelf of orbs, she picked up the glass ball that was used to record what happened to one particular set of circumstances. There were a number of people on the little planet she enjoyed watching and for whom she recorded their lives to watch later, but this one was probably her favorite. The orb in hand, she went to her relaxation room and put the orb into the projector. Turning, she went to her favorite chair and sat, putting her tired feet up. With a wave of her hand, a white mist coalesced and became a large mug of steaming hot chocolate. She had to hand it to those people, this was an excellent and comforting drink.

With a wave of her hand, the story started, displayed on the large wall across from her. She took a sip and started to relax. Another wave of her hand caused the story to jump to the last year. It had been a while since she had watched this person and his friends. Ah yes, the big fight. That had been so fun to watch; she had not even had to interfere. She sped the story up a bit to catch up with what had been going on, while she thought back.

She had interfered in this life. The changes to the event-line had been small, but she had made them. This sort of thing was her job, to make this part of the universe work properly -- to keep it in balance.

Unfortunately for her, she had had to interfere. She tried not to interfere too much in any one life.

It had all started many of their years ago when she allowed a prophecy to happen. The first mistake had been that she had let it happen without controlling the words. She had a good excuse as there was a revolution in a small country on the other side of the world, and if she had not tweaked things there, then it would have had global ramifications. She could only be one place at a time and had to choose; that was life sometimes. Because of that, she let the prophecy go through without checking the wording carefully -- oh the horror! To complicate matters, the person who heard the prophecy did not tell some people who he should have. Whether that was a flaw in him or a side-effect of the poorly worded prophecy, she was not totally sure, but her favorite theory was it had been caused by both problems together.

When she realized what had happened, she studied everything very carefully. She could not change the past, but she could tweak the present to affect the future. By the time her research was complete, the subject was an orphan. It was sad, but then again, there are hundreds of orphans created every day all around her world. The problem was this orphan would have a global effect. Part of her research was to consider what could happen in various scenarios, imaging a future based on events was within her power.

Deciding the future that was on her screen now was probably the best one, she had made two small tweaks. First, she made a small change at a house to what the man would call a spell. Second, she caused the man to forget to do a task and to cast an small extra spell he had not originally intended to do. In many ways, she was saddened to have picked this event-line as the subject would be hurt many times early in its life, but she had picked this one because in the long run, it was the best for the subject and for the world. And Fate always had her eye on the long run where global events were concerned.

There had been a third tweak years later, she suddenly remembered. The subject needed to relearn his life quickly. A little extra memory retention and intelligence had been easy to do. The result had been

tear-jerkingly beautiful, as evidenced by the scene on the display wall in front of her.

She watched the subject sit under a tree and have an intimate conversation with his favorite person in the world. Her eyes grew misty in happiness. With another wave of her hand, time sped up on the recording and came to the present. With tears in her eyes, she watched the two little people wed; they were so happy, the people around them were happy. Fate was so happy she cried with the mother of the bride.

Fate considered making a tweak right then, even though she was off the clock, but she stopped herself. There was no need to make sure they conceived tonight, there was no need to give the girl something to take forward as the boy would be with her for many of their years to come. A chuckle at the thought of them conceiving tonight helped her push past her moment of happy tears as she considered that might be cruel to them anyway, considering how fertile the girl was. No, she would let them go their own way. They were fine now and this part of the world was once again in balance; she had ensured that.

A shudder came over Fate as she thought about some of the other event-lines she had researched, or even the event-line that would have occurred with no tweaks at all, that would have been one of the worst outcomes actually. The boy would have been very alone and not known love until almost too late. He would have had to face horrible monsters like giant spiders, soul-sucking demons, and a big nasty snake many times his size. Oh, how she hated snakes. While he would have had some friends, they would have been far fewer than he had now, he would not have had a family, more people around him would have died, and the mentors who affected his life the most would most have been from “vile and nasty” to “well-meaning and somewhat manipulative” and unable to understand the boy as he really was. They would have basically used him and not told him everything he needed to know until almost too late. No, it was much better with her tweaks.

Fate smiled as she watched him run across her display wall with his new bride and a happy future on the horizon. She would check on

them again in a few of their years when she needed a good emotional boost. Fate was quite happy about how things had turned out. They could have turned out worse, much worse.

(end)

((A/N: As you can tell, I messed with the overall plot, swinging it massively one way at the beginning and then overly far back the other way for the school years. One of the interesting things I found as I wrote this story was that by taking care of 1 problem "early", then almost all the other problems for that year went away. So what was I lampooning? Yeah, it's pretty easy to tell now, isn't it:-) My next story should start coming out in about a month. -- kb))